

THE MESS OF MARRIAGE

SERIES: THE JACOB NARRATIVE

By Scott Grant

Dialogues of the deaf

“It is impossible to overemphasize the immense need humans have to be really listened to, to be taken seriously, to be understood,” writes the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tournier. “Listen to all the conversations of our world, between nations as well as those between couples. They are for the most part dialogues of the deaf.”⁽¹⁾ Now, for many married people what passes for communication with their partners feels like “dialogues of the deaf.” They feel unheard and unappreciated. Jacob didn’t listen to one of his wives, and he didn’t appreciate the plight of the other. What we see in the lives of these three people is a marital mess.

God seeks to form us in marriage, even a troubled marriage. Marriage for Jacob is a mirror in which he sees himself and is thereby prepared to meet with God. It is for us as well. Marriage shows us what we have done to others, what we are doing to others and what we have done with God. In this way, marriage leads us to meet with God.

God brings forth fruit from marriage, even a troubled marriage. While Jacob, Rachel and Leah are battling with each other, God gives birth to a nation: the 12 sons of Israel. Who knows what fruit will emerge from our marriages? This passage constitutes the center of the Jacob narrative, and as such, it draws particular attention to the birth of the nation of Israel. Both Leah and Rachel, whose names mean “cow” and “ewe,” respectively, were treated like cattle by their father Laban. He considered them “wages” (Genesis 29:15, 31:14-15). We know from the narrative that Jacob didn’t love Leah, and although he loved Rachel, he nevertheless treated her as if she were payment for services rendered (Genesis 29:21). These are two women who have had the life squeezed out of them. The Lord sees this, and he acts.

The Lord sees Leah

Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, “Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.” Then she conceived again and bore a son and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.” So she named him Simeon. She conceived again and bore a son and said, “Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore he was named Levi. And she conceived again and bore a son and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing. (Genesis 29:31-35)

When a biblical narrator tells us that the Lord “sees” or “hears” people in oppressed conditions, it usually means that the Lord is acting on their behalf. Jacob, Leah’s husband, “saw” her sister Rachel (Genesis 29:10). It is never reported that he saw Leah. Jacob loved Rachel for her beauty, but we’re told that Leah was “unloved”—unloved by Jacob, that is. This is what the Lord “sees.” The Lord loves Leah, and he wants her to know that so he opens her womb. Leah, who was invisible to her father and her husband and had no voice with them, is seen by the Lord—he sees her plight and hears her cry. Knowing that the Lord has heard her, gives Leah a voice to express her feelings to a world that has heretofore barely acknowledged her existence. She wanted her world to know—she wanted her husband to know—that she ached for his love. Her husband needed to know this. Rachel, on the other hand, was barren. Notice that the narrator does not tell us the Lord’s disposition toward Rachel’s condition. Rachel must be wondering, “What about me?”

The names given to the boys in this passage are connected by word play with some observation made by either Leah or Rachel. For example, Leah names her first son Reuben, which means “See, a son,” because the Lord has “seen” her affliction. She names her first two sons in acknowledgment of the Lord’s perception of her plight. After the birth of her first son, Leah expresses confidence that her husband will love her. “Surely,” she says, the gift of a son will turn his heart toward her. However, no response on Jacob’s part is reported. Leah’s observation after the birth of her second son—“the Lord has heard that I am unloved”—is an indication that Jacob’s heart was still cold toward Leah.

She expresses no hope that the birth of her second son will change Jacob, but implicit in her observation that she was “unloved” is the hope that Jacob will now love her. Perhaps she is afraid to express it, afraid to get her hopes up. After the birth of her third son, she expresses her hope again, but in a muted way. She doesn’t use the word “surely,” and her hope is simply that her husband will become attached to her, not that he will love her. She doesn’t think that the third son by himself will change Jacob’s heart, but she hopes that the total of three sons will elicit a response. But once again, Jacob is missing from the story. He neither sees nor hears Leah, who is crying out for his love. Leah has let this man inside her. These three precious gifts have grown inside her. She has nurtured them with her very life and endured the agony of childbirth to bring them into the world. What more could she offer him than the love and pain represented in these precious gifts that have come forth from her womb?

After the birth of her third son, Leah said, “This time my husband will become attached to me.” Notice though that after the birth of her fourth son, she says, “This time I will praise the Lord.” For the moment, at least, Leah orients herself toward the Lord.

Rachel sees herself

Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.” Then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” She said, “Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.” So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, “God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.” Therefore she named him Dan. Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. So Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.” And she named him Naphtali. When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, “How fortunate!” So she named him Gad. Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. Then Leah said, “Happy am I! For women will call me happy.” So she named him Asher. (Genesis 30:1-13)

Leah’s plight was recognized by the Lord in that he “saw” that she was unloved. After the Lord blessed Leah and she gave birth to four sons, Rachel “saw” that she bore Jacob no children. Rachel must feel that the Lord doesn’t see her, and that she must take action. Moved by jealousy, Rachel says to Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.” Her cry echoes that of Rebekah when the twins were wrestling each other in her womb (Genesis 25:22). Rachel’s plight, however, is not nearly so desperate.

In the face of her sister’s fertility, one child isn’t enough for Rachel. She demands not a child but “children.” Eventually, she will give birth to children—two, in fact. Her words, “Give me children, or else I die,” will hang over the birth of her second child, which will result in her death (Genesis 35:16-19).

Rachel overstates her plight, much as Esau, who demanded stew from Jacob with the words, “Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there,” and, “I am about to die” (Genesis 25:30, 32). Jacob hears the voice of his brother in the words of his wife. Jacob had something to gain when his brother came to him, but when his wife comes to him, he sees himself as having nothing to gain and nothing to give. His response to Rachel, therefore, is entirely different. He now, ironically, finds himself in the position of his father, whose two sons

fought with each other for his favor. Now Jacob has two wives who are fighting with each other for his favor. First two brothers, and now two sisters, find themselves in conflict with each other.

Jacob also hears his own voice in the words of his wife. Jacob demanded that Laban hand over Rachel with the words, “Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her” (Genesis 29:21). Jacob demanded that Laban deliver the goods: a wife. Now his wife demands that Jacob deliver the goods: children.

Leah, whose appearance was weak, wanted children because her husband didn’t love her. And the Lord gives her children. The Lord had already given Rachel beauty, and her husband loves her. But now Rachel wants children because she’s jealous of Leah, and Leah wants what Rachel has: Jacob’s love. Each sister is jealous of the gifts God has given to the other and each covets those gifts.

Jacob caves in

Jacob, in so many words, tells Rachel that he isn’t God. In this story, as in the rest of scripture, it is clear that God gives children (Genesis 29:33, 30:6). Jacob may have been strong enough to open a well, but he knows he’s not strong enough to open a womb (Genesis 29:10). In one sense, Jacob responds properly; he can’t play the role of God. In another sense, he responds insensitively, along the lines of Elkanah’s response to Hannah (1 Samuel 1:8). He communicates no sympathy for his wife’s pain. On the contrary, his anger burned against her. Instead, he should have prayed. His father’s prayer in the face of his mother’s barrenness led to his own birth (Genesis 25:21), but at this point in his life, Jacob is not a man of prayer.

Rachel proposes to solve her problem by offering her maid Bilhah to Jacob that she may “bear on my knees.” This expression means that Rachel will adopt the children (Genesis 50:23). She resorts to surrogate maternity, a practice that the narrator frowned on when Sarah employed it (Genesis 16:1-6). In other words, Rachel doesn’t choose to wait on God. Likewise, Jacob, who a moment ago contended that he was not in the place of God, nonetheless also takes matters into his own hands. Rachel then sees the birth of a son through Bilhah as the Lord’s vindication of her over Leah. The Lord has “heard” her voice, she says. The narrator said that the Lord “saw” that Leah was unloved before she conceived. Upon giving birth, Leah said that the Lord had “seen” her affliction and “heard” that she was unloved. The narrator, however, does not tell us that the Lord perceived Rachel in any way. The Lord, of course, has heard Rachel’s voice, but not in the way that Rachel supposes. The hearing of the Lord that means the gift of a son will come later in the narrative. Rachel, though, supposes that the Lord has taken her side.

The birth of Bilhah’s second son prompts Rachel to say, literally, “With the wrestlings of God I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.” Rachel, once again, sees God as taking her side. Even though the score is now 4 to 2 in favor of Leah, Rachel has beauty and a loving husband on her side, so she thinks she’s in the lead.

There was another time when two siblings had squared off against each other, in the manner of Jacob and Esau. Rachel and Leah also use their children as weapons against each other in the same manner Isaac and Rebekah did (Genesis 27). The sisters treat their children as pawns, just as their father treated them, and their competitiveness will be sown among their children and the 12 tribes of Israel that proceed from the children.

Further on into the Jacob narrative, Jacob will wrestle with a strange visitor, who will tell him that “you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). The match in Genesis 32 will be representative of his conflicts with Esau and Laban and, ultimately, his conflict with God. Here, in Genesis 30, Jacob once again sees his life mirrored in the lives of his wives. If he were to look in the mirror long enough, he would see his conflict with God.

Leah strikes back

Leah says in essence, “Two can play at that game.” Earlier, the Lord “saw” Leah’s condition and acted in her

behalf. Now, it is reported that she, not the Lord, “saw” her condition. She has stooped to Rachel’s level. Rachel “saw” her own condition and refused to wait on the Lord.

Now Leah gives her maid Zilpah to Jacob and responds to Rachel’s two sons with two of her own. She attributed her first two births to the Lord. However, she attributes neither birth through Zilpah to the Lord. In fact, she attributes the birth of Gad to good luck.

After the birth of her fourth son, Leah expressed no hope that her childbearing would kindle Jacob’s affections. She simply said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” With the births of two sons through Zilpah, once again she does not express hope that Jacob will respond. Neither, however, does she praise the Lord. Instead, after the birth of Asher, she says, “Happy am I! For women will call me happy.” The reason for her happiness is the disposition of other women toward her. Her orientation shifted from her husband to the Lord, but now it has shifted from the Lord to other women. It appears that she is looking neither for her husband’s love nor the Lord’s love, but for acknowledgment from other women. She sees herself in competition with a woman, and she looks to other women to vindicate her cause. Competitiveness has evacuated her life of spiritual content.

Let’s make a deal

Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” But she said to her, “Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son’s mandrakes also?” So Rachel said, “Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.” When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he lay with her that night. God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Then Leah said, “God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband.” So she named him Issachar. Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. Then Leah said, “God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.” So she named him Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah. (Genesis 30:14-21)

Reuben’s discovery of mandrakes ushers in the next chapter of the saga. Mandrakes were considered an aphrodisiac and something of a fertility drug (Song of Solomon 7:13). The sisters speak to each other for the first time in the narrative. Now, their conflict comes out into the open. Later, Leah and Rachel will find themselves in agreement with one another (Genesis 31:14-16). In fact, their openness about their conflict may have been a step toward reconciliation.

Leah sees Rachel as a taker, just as Esau had viewed Jacob (Genesis 27:36). She notes that Rachel has taken her husband. In light of Rachel’s response, Leah not only means that Rachel has become a second—and favored—wife to Jacob but that only Rachel shares a bed with him. Rachel makes Leah an offer. She wants the mandrakes (and children); Leah wants Jacob (and love), so Rachel proposes a deal: Mandrakes for a night with Jacob. The two sisters bargain over a plant product in the manner of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25:33-34).

Jacob returns to Leah

Now Jacob, for the first time in Genesis, comes in from the field. Leah, as the first one in the Jacob narrative to go out to meet someone coming in from the field, demonstrates her desperation for love. She uses an expression—“you must come in to me”—that is used for having sex with a particular woman for the first time. Leah has certainly had sex with Jacob in the past, so her words seem to imply that she had some time ago been shut out from the marriage bed. She sees herself as having “hired” Jacob. The commercial nature of Jacob’s relationship with Laban is now seen in his relationships with his wives (Genesis 29:15; 30:28; 31:7, 41). He’s a man for hire, both in the field and in his home.

On the two occasions when his brother came in from the field, Jacob took advantage of him. Now Jacob,

without the backbone to resist his wives' maneuverings, gives in once again to one of their schemes. He lies with Leah. Once again, someone comes in from the field, and a transaction takes place. Once again, Jacob reaps what he has sowed.

God gives heed to Leah

Once again, the narrator tells us that God perceived Leah in some way and that as a result she conceived. In this case, he "gave heed" to her. But notice that the Lord gives heed to Leah, not to the mandrakes. Rachel, who bargained for the mandrakes in the hope that she would conceive, continues in barrenness. The narrator would not have us believe, however, that the Lord smiles on Leah's tactics. The Lord blesses her, not her tactics, just as he blessed Jacob, not his tactics.

Leah thinks that God has rewarded her for giving her maid Zilpah to Jacob. Leah was denied access to Jacob and thought that the only way to compete with her sister for the affections of Jacob was to give her maid to her husband. We now find out that this was by no means an easy decision for Leah. It represented a painful recourse in the face of distance from her husband. She sees herself as having paid dearly in offering Zilpah to Jacob. Now she sees the Lord as paying her "wages" for her sacrifice.

God, again, has clearly recognized her plight with the birth of Issachar, but he is not paying Leah her wages. Laban pays wages. God sees; God hears; God gives heed; God blesses. He doesn't pay wages. What does Leah hope this son will do for her? She doesn't say, at least for now.

Leah has found her way back to the marriage bed, for she bears yet another son. She's now up to six, half the number of the sons of Israel. She correctly sees this son not as wages from God but as a gift from God. And she expresses the hope, one last time, that Jacob will respond to her. The word translated "dwell with" in this case probably means "to acknowledge as one's lawful wife." Six sons give Leah hope, but the gift of half the sons of Israel is still not enough for Jacob. Even so, Leah seems to be moving toward the Lord once again. Evidently, luck, the recognition she sought from other women, and her belief that God pays wages have let her down.

Finally, Leah gives birth to a girl. The Hebrew scriptures seldom mention the birth of a girl. The exception here, with the birth of Dinah, sets the stage for her role in Genesis 35. Leah has now given birth to seven children. Seven is the number of perfection. God has entered into Leah's loneliness and transformed her, in a sense, into a mother of perfection.

God remembers Rachel

Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. So she conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." She named him Joseph, saying, "May the LORD give me another son." (Genesis 30:22-24)

Finally, after all this birthing and warring, the narrator tells us that God "remembered" and "gave heed to" Rachel and opened her womb. The Lord perceived Leah. Finally, he perceives Rachel. Rachel pleaded with her husband, resorted to surrogate maternity and employed mandrakes in the quest for children, but only God can open Rachel's womb, and he does so, it seems, in his own sweet time. The Lord makes Rachel, in her barrenness, wait and watch as 11 children emerge from wombs other than hers. Although she announced that she had prevailed over Leah in the war of the wombs, we now find out that her barrenness caused her great shame. Earlier, when she credited God with acting on her behalf, she did so incorrectly, presuming that he was favoring her through the birth of surrogate children. Now she rightly attributes the birth of her own son to the Lord, employing God's covenant name, Yahweh. The Lord, she says, has taken away her reproach.

Earlier, Rachel demanded that Jacob give her children. Here, she invokes the Lord in her hopes for another son. She finally acknowledges that only God can open a womb.

Identifying with Leah

Like Leah, some of us feel that important people, perhaps even our spouses, don't listen to us. It's as if we're invisible, or as if we can't communicate. We're unseen and unheard, without a presence and without a voice. All of us ache to be heard and seen and understood. More often than not we'll be happy if someone at least tries to understand us.

For those of us who feel unseen and unheard, we need to know this: God sees us and hears us. We have an audience with him, and he hears our voice—and the heart behind it. He wants to see us; he wants to hear us. In this, God is not only seeing and hearing, he's also speaking and his seeing and hearing say something. They say that he loves us.

God's love for us, then, gives us a voice with others. When God sees and hears Leah, she speaks up, and she speaks from her heart. God's love, then, has the ability to unlock hearts and loosen tongues. God wants us to speak from our hearts. We have a voice with him. He wants us to know that and find that we can speak to our world. Some of you, knowing that God hears you, may be compelled to tell your spouse that you ache for his or her love.

Still, your world may not listen. Leah, after God gave her a voice, cried out for her husband's love. She brought forth magnificent gifts: seven children. But Jacob still didn't see or hear her.

Some of us, like Leah, feel trapped in a marriage, or in a family or even in a community that knows little of love. It is a good thing to want love. For this we cannot fault Leah and we should not fault ourselves. If you don't want the love of your spouse, you've killed something in your heart that is part of your humanity.

It is a world of imperfect love. Sometimes, it seems completely loveless. But God asks us to live in it and in challenging relationships, believing that he sees, that he hears, that he loves—and that one day he will make everything right.

All of us start out wanting the love of our world. Then many of us, like Leah, discover the love of God and we become his worshipers. But from there it's never a steady climb up the spiritual mountain. Someone takes what we have or gets what we want. Competition draws us away from the Lord and we look elsewhere—to luck, recognition, the hope that God will pay off for good behavior. Then maybe, when everything else has ravaged our hearts, we begin to rebuild a worldview based more securely on God's sure—though wildly unpredictable—love for us.

In a world of imperfect love, God is doing his perfect work in us. We want a little love. Leah wanted a little love; instead, she got a lot of God's love, and gave birth to a little nation—a little nation that gave birth to the Savior. We want something that comes from us to get a little recognition, to get a little love. God wants to enter our loneliness, form us and transform us. What comes from us may be achieving far more than we know. We want the world to give us something. But we may be giving something to the world. God may be using a troubled marriage to form us. And he may be using a troubled marriage to give something to the world.

Identifying with Rachel

Some of us, like Rachel, sit back and watch others get what we want. God acts for others, it seems, but not for us. It seems as if God doesn't see us or our plight. At times we wonder, "Does he care?" For couples unable to have children, for example, the disappointment can be excruciating, and it can challenge their faith at the deepest level.

When God doesn't give us what we want, we may be inclined to expect others to get it for us. We may, in a sense, expect others to give us what only God can give. We may expect them to be God. Nothing can frustrate relationships like expecting people to do and be what is impossible for them. No one is up to the task of

fulfilling the role of God and we shouldn't be surprised, then, when our impossibly high expectations provoke angry responses.

Through force of will and intimidation, sometimes we're able to get people to cooperate with us. When they do, and when they come through, it's easy for us to assume, as Rachel did, that God has answered us when, in fact, he had nothing to do with it. Sometimes, it takes a legitimate blessing from God, somewhere down the line, for us to see that our prior understanding of his involvement was incorrect and for us to acknowledge his proper place.

Identifying with the sisters

Like both Leah and Rachel, we want and we do not have and we become jealous of those who have what we want, be it love, children or something else. We must be aware, however, that our attitudes and actions have impact. We sow the seeds of jealousy and competitiveness among our children and others who know us.

When we find ourselves in competition with someone else, it is better to bring it out in the open than to wage war in silence. A wordless war is not the stage for reconciliation. But when combatants come out in the open and face each other, as Leah and Rachel did, reconciliation becomes possible.

Identifying with Jacob

Jacob's story impresses upon us the importance of seeing and hearing the people God has placed in our lives. Closed off to the world around us, we're often oblivious to the pain of even those who are closest to us, particularly if we don't see any way in which they advance our cause. But God isn't oblivious. He hears those who are crying out, even if no one else does, and he will answer those cries in his perfect time. When he does, those of us who refused to listen may have to answer for ourselves.

Our fast-paced world, and the many causes we embrace in it, doesn't lend itself to listening to someone's heart. We fail to pick up the signs of pain in someone else. Indeed, we may not be even looking for them. We're so oblivious that we don't even know we're not listening. This story should move us to care, to open our ears, to take the time. Of course, you can't listen to everyone. But we must listen to those who are closest to us—certainly to our spouses, to our children and, if we're in a position of spiritual leadership, to those placed in our care.

The story also challenges us to appreciate the deep and beautiful qualities in each other, even if the surface-level qualities don't immediately catch our eye. We crush those who love us when we don't appreciate the good gifts that they offer us as coming from the center of their hearts. Some of us, like Jacob, are theologically correct but relationally insensitive. We know what's right, and what's right is important to us. In fact, being right is most important to us. Winning becomes more important than someone's heart. We allow power to triumph over love and love loses; hearts sink.

What do you do when someone has impossible expectations for you, when you feel, in a sense, that someone is asking you to fulfill the role of God? Jacob's anger burned; then he caved in and usurped the role of God. Such may be our tendency as well. Jacob's story, considered in light of Rebekah's barrenness, tells us this: Don't get angry; get on your knees. If someone expects you to do what it seems like only God can do, go to God. Perhaps God will act on that person's behalf, or perhaps they'll seek God instead of us. If we're always trying to meet all of someone's needs, we're neither doing them nor ourselves any favors. We're trying to be God, an impossible burden, and we're keeping someone else from seeking God. To use a modern word, we're co-dependent.

If we find ourselves responding—or not responding—as Jacob did, it may mean that our relationship with the Lord needs some attention. The Lord, through his relationship with us, would give us both the spiritual sensitivity and weight to respond—or not respond—appropriately.

Finally, we learn from Jacob that marriage is a mirror. Having to relate to another person day in and day out, year in and year out can show you something about yourself. Marriage tends to be a relationship in which you reap what you have sowed and you sow what you have reaped. You see the pain that you have caused, and you see the pain that you're causing. It shows you, as it showed Jacob, that you need to meet with God.

Happily ever after?

We tend to think it's our God-given right to live happily ever after. God is by no means opposed to happiness, but he is in favor of a kind of happiness that is better than our version. He can do something with our messy marriages without making them everything we want them to be. He doesn't straighten out the marriages in this story, but he does form the marriage partners. He forms Leah in a loveless marriage and Rachel in a childless marriage. He forms Jacob in two marriages in which he reaps what he has sowed and sows what he has reaped.

In this messy story, God gives birth to his people: the nation of Israel. We may not like the way Israel begins. A perfect beginning is what we might prefer: One woman, one man, and children from one marriage. We may want something like Adam and Eve. That was a perfect beginning. Then again, that didn't work out so well, either. They made a mess of things in no time. Yet, God gave birth to humanity.

Don't ever sell short what God can do in and through a messy marriage.

NOTES

(1) Quoted in *The Crucial Question for These Noisy Times May Just Be: 'Huh?'* Cynthia Crossen, Wall Street Journal, July 10, 1997. P.1A.

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