

The preceding chapters of the Biblical book of Genesis have established a pattern of [calculating](#) and [deceptive](#) behavior in Jacob's character. Here in Genesis chapter twenty-nine, we'll encounter someone who shared a similar mindset. But this time, Jacob will assume the role of a victim in those encounters

***“So Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the East” (Genesis 29:1).***

The distance that Jacob traveled was about five hundred miles (800 km) and likely spanned a period of four to six weeks. That long and arduous journey eventually brought him to the ancestral homeland of his mother, Rebekah, and grandfather Abraham.

***“And he looked, and saw a well in the field; and behold, there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for out of that well they watered the flocks. A large stone was on the well's mouth” (Genesis 29:2).***

From our 21st century perspective, it may be easy to forget that there were no road maps or global positioning satellite technologies available to assist Jacob on his journey. This meant that Jacob and other travelers of that era were often reliant on information gleaned from others they encountered along the way.

If you were a stranger coming into town during that time, the first place to visit was the community water well. The reason was quite simple; a local shepherd or a resident would eventually need to draw water from the well. That would enable the traveler to enter a conversation with a member of the local population, establish his or her location, and determine how much further he or she had to go.

***“Now all the flocks would be gathered there; and they would roll the stone from the well's mouth, water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the well's mouth” (Genesis 29:3).***

Water wells of that era were often covered with large stones to help prevent the accumulation of sand or other contaminants. They also minimized the potential for evaporation in the heat of the day. So Jacob took note of these nearby sheep and headed over to interview their shepherds...

***“And Jacob said to them, 'My brethren, where are you from?' And they said, 'We are from Haran.' Then he said to them, 'Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?' And they said, 'We know him.'***

***So he said to them, 'Is he well?' And they said, 'He is well. And look, his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep'” (Genesis 29:4-6).***

That brief conversation provided Jacob with some crucial information and confirmed his arrival at the destination point of his journey. It also offered an opportunity for Jacob to display his quick-witted nature...

***“Then he said, “Look, it is still high day; it is not time for the cattle to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go and feed them”” (Genesis 29:7).***

The previous chapter of Genesis established the mandate for Jacob's long journey: ***“Arise, go to Padan Aram, to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and take yourself a wife from there of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother” (Genesis 28:2).*** Rachel fit those parameters, and as soon as Jacob heard about her, it appears that he began thinking several steps ahead: ***“Why don't you water the flocks so they can get back to grazing? ...They'll be hungry if you stop so early in the day” (TLB).***

That exchange offers some insight into Jacob's probable strategy: ***“Why don't you shepherds find something else to do while I get to know Rachel a little better.”*** Unfortunately for Jacob, these local shepherds weren't so willing to cooperate...

***“But they said, 'We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and they have rolled the stone from the well's mouth; then we water the sheep'” (Genesis 29:8).***

Perhaps these shepherds were disinterested in taking orders from a stranger, or maybe they misunderstood him. Either way, it wasn't long before Rachel arrived, and that's when Jacob decided to put on a demonstration.

***“Now while he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep, for she was a shepherdess.***

***And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, that Jacob went near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother” (Genesis 29:9-10).***

It seems likely that the stone covering this well typically required more than one person to move it. That may explain why these shepherds wanted to wait for all the flocks to gather before watering their sheep (Genesis 29:8).

But instead of waiting for their help, Jacob elected to move this stone by himself. It's possible that Jacob sought to impress Rachel with this display of physical strength or he may have been older and stronger than these other shepherds. Nevertheless, Jacob moved this stone on his own and took it upon himself to provide water for Rachel's flock.

This little demonstration becomes important when we take a moment to remember the instructions Jacob received from his father back in Genesis 28:2: ***“Go at once to your mother’s father Bethuel in northern Syria and choose a wife from one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother” (CEV).*** Jacob’s conversation with these shepherds told him that Rachel fit those requirements, so he took the opportunity to demonstrate his strength and generosity toward her.

What happened next surely came as a shock to the young shepherdess...

***“Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice and wept. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s relative and that he was Rebekah’s son. So she ran and told her father” (Genesis 29:11-12).***

This day probably began like any other day for Rachel; another day of following the same tired routine. But this day was different, for God was about to initiate a sequence of events that would change her life forever.

The “kiss” between Jacob and Rachel wasn't the kind of kiss we might see between two romantic partners. This was the customary kiss of greeting that is still practiced in various Mediterranean cultures today. Nevertheless, Jacob grew highly emotional at this encounter, for he had not only arrived at his destination, but had also met a potential marriage partner as well.

***“Then it came to pass, when Laban heard the report about Jacob his sister’s son, that he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. So he told Laban all these things. And Laban said to him, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh.' And he stayed with him for a month.***

***Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what should your wages be?'" (Genesis 29:13-15).***

We first met Laban back in Genesis chapter twenty-four when his sister Rebekah left home to marry Jacob’s father, Isaac. While it seemed very generous of Laban to say, ***“You are my nephew, and you are like one of my own family” (CEV),*** we’ll soon find that Laban actually planned to treat Jacob more like a slave than a respected family member.

But first, let's look at the family reunion that's described for us within these verses. Genesis 29:13-15 tells us that Jacob initially stayed with his uncle Laban for a month. During this time, Jacob probably discussed the latest news from his mother's side of the family and the events that brought him to Haran.

There were two other items that Jacob surely discussed as well. One was the dream that featured the God-given [image of a staircase](#) reaching up to heaven. The other was the directive he received from his father: "...*go at once to Paddan-aram... and marry one of your uncle Laban's daughters*" (Genesis 28:2 NLT).

At the end of that one-month period, Laban responded by saying, "...*Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what should your wages be?*" So it appears that Jacob's importance to Laban's household grew rapidly, and he quickly became so indispensable that Laban essentially told him, "*If you want to stay and work for me, you can name your own salary.*"

So Laban asked Jacob to name his wages, but we'll soon find out that Jacob wasn't interested in a paycheck. When it came to negotiating his salary, Jacob had something else in mind.

***"Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were delicate, but Rachel was beautiful of form and appearance" (Genesis 29:16-17).***

These verses introduce us to a woman named Leah, Rachel's older sister. Although Leah will eventually go on to become an important figure in Israel's national history, there are some questions concerning this reference to her eyes.

The original language of this passage refers to Leah's eyes as "*tender, soft, or delicate.*" <sup>(1)</sup> This may simply mean that Leah suffered from poor eyesight, or perhaps her eyes were dull and lifeless. Some believe this reference alludes to the possibility that Leah had blue eyes, an unusual (and likely unappealing) feature in that culture.

But none of that mattered to Jacob because Rachel was the one that he really wanted. Since Laban asked Jacob to name his own salary, Jacob made him an offer:

***"Now Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for Rachel your younger daughter.' And Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another man. Stay with me'" (Genesis 29:18-19).***

When a marriage agreement was accepted in that era, the groom customarily gave a gift of money or goods to the bride's family. These gifts served two purposes. First, they served to demonstrate the groom's financial ability to support his bride. They also compensated the bride's family for the loss of their daughter as a valuable worker.

But even though Jacob came from a wealthy family, he probably arrived in Haran with little in the way of financial or material resources. Since Jacob's brother was [planning to murder him](#), returning home for additional resources was out of the question, at least in the short term.

However, Jacob had the ability to compensate Laban in another way- by providing seven years of free labor. So Laban contemplated that offer and responded with his acceptance. But Jacob would soon learn an important lesson from Uncle Laban: *verify your order before you accept delivery.*

(1) H7390 - [raḵ](#) - Strong's Hebrew Lexicon (kjv). (n.d.). Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h7390/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

***“So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her” (Genesis 29:20).***

Imagine what it must be like to work for seven years without pay. That’s exactly what Jacob did in order to earn the right to marry Laban’s daughter Rachel. Jacob must have been desperately in love with Rachel; in fact, our text from Genesis 29:20 tells us that his love for her was such that seven years of labor seemed as if they were only a few days in duration.

***“Then Jacob said to Laban, ‘Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in to her’” (Genesis 29:21).***

Upon completion of his end of their arrangement, Jacob was naturally ready to get married and start his honeymoon with his new bride. However, we should notice that Jacob had to approach Laban to remind him that he had fulfilled his contractual obligation, and not the other way around.

Laban had undoubtedly grown accustomed to his arrangement with Jacob and was likely displeased at the thought of losing this source of unpaid labor. That may explain why Jacob had to approach Laban and remind him, ***“My time is completed.”***

Nevertheless, Laban was a shrewd individual, and he wasn’t willing to let Jacob go so easily. So he engineered a plan to ensure that Jacob remained in his employ...

***“And Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast. Now it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. And Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. So it came to pass in the morning, that behold, it was Leah...” (Genesis 29:22-25).***

It’s easy to read this passage and think, *“How could Laban get away with that!? How could Jacob fail to recognize that he was marrying the wrong woman?”* Well, if Laban had been living in our modern-day world, there is no realistic way that he could have gotten away with this. However, these events did not take place in the 21st century; they took place thousands of years ago when things were substantially different.

So how did Laban fool Jacob into spending his wedding night with a woman he didn’t want to marry? The answer lies in several contributing factors that enabled Laban to successfully execute this deceptive plan.

First, we should remember that the sexes were often segregated in that culture. There were strict social guidelines that kept a betrothed couple apart from one another until their wedding ceremony. The societal constraints upon Jacob and Rachel meant that his knowledge of her was far less intimate than it might be if they were a couple today.

The wedding customs of that era also made it easier for Laban to trick Jacob into marrying Leah. One wedding tradition compelled a bride to remain veiled until she was alone with her husband following their wedding ceremony. As strange as this may sound today, it was thus possible for a man to marry his bride without ever seeing her face during the ceremony.

If darkness had fallen by the time Jacob and his bride were finally alone, it would help explain how Jacob was tricked into thinking Leah was actually Rachel. While modern-day electrical power makes it easy to illuminate a room today, Jacob’s interior lighting options were limited to a few flickering lamps or candles at best. That would have made it very difficult for him to get a positive ID on his new bride.

So let's put these elements together. First, we have a bride who was adorned in a wedding veil that hid her face. The text states Laban brought Leah to Jacob "*in the evening*," suggesting it was after sunset when they were finally alone together ([Genesis 29:23](#)).

Finally, Jacob and his new bride spent their wedding night in a tent or room that likely featured little or no interior lighting. If we combine these things with the possibility that Jacob may have enjoyed a few too many glasses of wine at his wedding reception, it could easily explain how he married one woman when he was expecting to marry someone else.

When the sun came up on the morning following his wedding night, Jacob suddenly found that his new bride was not who she was supposed to be; and Jacob knew exactly who was responsible...

***"...And he said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?'***

***And Laban said, 'It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfill her week, and we will give you this one also for the service which you will serve with me still another seven years.'***

***Then Jacob did so and fulfilled her week. So he gave him his daughter Rachel as wife also. And Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as a maid. Then Jacob also went in to Rachel, and he also loved Rachel more than Leah. And he served with Laban still another seven years"***  
***(Genesis 29:25-30).***

There is a wise Biblical saying that describes what happened to Jacob in these verses: "... *a man reaps what he sows*" ([Galatians 6:7 NIV](#)). This Scripture highlights the link between today's actions and tomorrow's repercussions. In Jacob's case, Laban's deceptive act reflected his own behavior from years earlier.

You see, Jacob was once involved in a [similar hoax of his own](#) when he tricked his elderly, blind, father into giving him an inheritance that his father sought to give to his older brother. Now things had changed, and Jacob the deceiver had fallen victim to an act of deceit. Thus, Jacob reaped what he sowed, just as we're told in Galatians 6:7.

So Jacob was faced with a problem, but Laban was ready with a helpful solution; helpful for *him*, that is: "***Finish the week of wedding festivities with this daughter. Then we will give you the other one too. But you'll have to work for me another seven years***" (*GW*). Since it was customary to hold a week-long wedding celebration during that era, Laban essentially told Jacob, "*Let Leah enjoy her honeymoon and then can marry Rachel too.*"

So Jacob thought he was marrying Rachel but unknowingly married her sister, Leah, instead. Then he had to work another seven years without pay to secure the privilege of marrying the woman he really wanted.

This account from Genesis 29:25-30 almost sounds like a story line for a theatrical farce. But in reality, there was nothing funny about what transpired in these verses. To understand why, let's examine the roles of those who were involved in this unfortunate incident.

First there was Laban, Leah and Rachel's father. Laban did not regard his daughter's marital engagement as an opportunity to provide for her happiness and fulfillment. Instead, he saw an opportunity to secure seven years of free labor from his new son-in-law.

Since Laban was responsible to arrange marriages for both his daughters, he apparently viewed Rachel's wedding as little more than a business transaction that would enable him to secure a “two for one” bargain.

Of course, Laban had to account for the possibility that Jacob would refuse his proposed solution once he uncovered Laban's deceptive plan. But even if Jacob declined that offer, Laban would presumably have little difficulty in securing a new marriage partner for an attractive woman like Rachel ([Genesis 29:17](#)).

The problem for Jacob was that he was so [deeply in love with Rachel](#) that the very notion of permitting her to marry someone else was unthinkable. That enabled Laban to leverage Jacob's love for his daughter to his own advantage.

Even if Jacob and Rachel chose to elope (something that is common today but practically unheard of then), it would do nothing to alter the status of his new relationship with Leah. Plus, Laban still profited from the seven years of free labor Jacob had already rendered.

So this shrewd, calculating businessman had Jacob in a “no-win” situation. If Jacob wanted to be with Rachel, he would have to agree to Laban's terms.

As bad as this was for Jacob, Laban inflicted considerable injury on his daughters as well. To illustrate the depth of those injuries, let's first consider Leah's participation in this scheme. Leah had to be involved in this plan to deceive Jacob, but why would she agree to do so? Why would Leah agree to marry someone who...

1. Didn't really love her.
2. Wanted to marry her sister instead?

One possible answer is that Leah was also in love with Jacob. If Laban knew Leah had romantic yearnings for Jacob, then his path to convincing her to participate in this deceitful plan would be made considerably easier.

It's also possible that Leah saw this as her best opportunity to marry and didn't want to let that prospect slip away. Another plausible explanation is that Laban used his power and influence to coerce Leah into compliance with his plan. Since a father was the undisputed family leader in the patriarchal society of that era, it was unthinkable for a daughter to disobey a directive from her father. Since Laban's plan required Leah's prior involvement, we can't ignore the possibility that Laban used his position to compel her to do something she didn't want to do.

Then there was the emotional component of this sordid tale. Consider what it must have been like for Leah on her wedding night. For instance, Leah knew that her new husband thought he was with another woman as they consummated their relationship. That “someone else” was her own sister.

Then there was Rachel. She waited seven long years for the opportunity to wed Jacob, only to have him marry another woman at the last minute. That “someone else” was her own sister. But how could Rachel allow something like that to occur?

As was the case with Leah, there are several potential answers to that question. First, it's clear that Laban was a devious character; perhaps he deceived Rachel as well. We should also remember that what was true for Leah was also true of Rachel as well: a father had absolute authority over his daughters in that culture. It's possible that Laban simply used his authority as Rachel's father to enforce his desired outcome.

Nevertheless, it is easy to sympathize with Rachel's plight, given the emotional turmoil that any bride might experience if another woman took her place at the altar. That's what Rachel had to endure on the day she was supposed to marry Jacob.

So what applications can we take from Jacob's experience in Genesis chapter twenty-nine?

To address that question, we should first consider these events in the context of what took place earlier [in Genesis chapter 27](#). That chapter recounts Jacob's deceptive (yet successful) attempt to secure the birthright intended for his elder brother. Yet, Jacob's participation in that manipulative scheme did nothing to affect God's pre-determined plan.

Jacob didn't have to trick his father into giving him that inheritance, for God had [already determined](#) to grant it to him. However, God eventually brought Laban into Jacob's life, and he fell victim to a fraudulent scheme that mirrored the one he perpetrated against his father. Unfortunately for Jacob, he will spend an additional thirteen years (in addition to the seven he already spent) learning some hard lessons in Laban's classroom.

Jacob's experience reminds us that our actions may impact the way we experience God's plan for our lives. Consider Jesus' counsel from the gospel of Matthew...

***“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30).***

A "yoke" is a device that is placed between two or more animals that unites them together when pulling a wagon or a plow. This portion of Scripture from Matthew's Gospel thus serves to remind us that we can do things the easy way by listening to and applying Jesus' teachings in our lives.

We can also do things the hard way by ignoring God's direction and scheming to get our way, much like Jacob. Either way, God will advance His agenda regardless of our alignment with His plan. If we do things God's way, we may avoid a situation like the one that Jacob experienced with Laban.

***“When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren” (Genesis 29:31).***

While it's easy to sympathize with Rachel, it's difficult not to feel sorry for Leah, for she was now entrapped in an unwanted marriage. In fact, the word translated “**unloved**” in Genesis 29:31 may also be translated “*to hate.*” <sup>(1)</sup>

So it seems that Jacob was angry with Leah over her involvement in Laban's deceptive plan. However, it also appears that Jacob wasn't angry enough to stop engaging in marital relations with her and she eventually became pregnant with a son...

***“So Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, 'The Lord has surely looked on my affliction. Now therefore, my husband will love me'” (Genesis 29:32).***

The first child born to Jacob through Leah was named Reuben. As Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben would normally be the inheritor of the promises that God bestowed upon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But as we'll see, things will work out differently for Reuben.

***“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.’ And she called his name Simeon” (Genesis 29:33).***

The name Simeon means “heard.”<sup>(2)</sup> Leah gave him that name because, “*The LORD has heard that my husband doesn’t love me*” (CEV).

*“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 his name was called Levi” (Genesis 29:34).*

Leah named her third son “Levi,” a name that means “joined to.”<sup>(3)</sup> So it seems that Leah was hopeful that her third child would prompt a greater degree of emotional attachment with Jacob.

*“And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘Now I will praise the LORD.’ Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she stopped bearing” (Genesis 29:35).*

Leah named her fourth son Judah, a name meaning “praised.”<sup>(4)</sup> Judah will eventually become the ancestor of king David, king Solomon, and Jesus, the Savior. So even while Leah felt neglected and unloved, she still had a place in God's plan and she learned to praise and honor God despite her circumstances.

(1) H8130 - śānē’ - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon* (kjv). (n.d.). *Blue Letter Bible*.  
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h8130/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

(2) H8095 - šim’ôn - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon* (kjv). (n.d.). *Blue Letter Bible*.  
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h8095/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

(3) H3878 - lēvî - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon* (kjv). (n.d.). *Blue Letter Bible*.  
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3878/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

(4) H3063 - yəhûdâ - *Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon* (kjv). (n.d.). *Blue Letter Bible*.  
<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3063/kjv/wlc/0-1/>