

Reading Biblical Narrative - The Narrator and His Characters - Deceit

Readers of biblical narrative are sometimes faced with a thorny puzzle. The characters are quite capable of lying and deceit - how do we find out about it? The majority of these situations can be classified as one of three possibilities:

a. The simplest option is for the narrator to make things easy for us and tell us in so many words about any deceit going on.

b. Often, we do not immediately discover whether we can take characters at face value, or whether they mean what they say. This takes us into the situation we often experience in our own life: unable to gauge another person, we are forced to compare words with actions, and have to reach an interpretation or conclusion by way of often laborious combination and deduction. It is exactly the same with the characters in the biblical story. If they speak pretty words while committing atrocities, we take our cue from the latter. Characters are mainly concerned with their own present: of course, it is their life.

c. If the writer considers it important that we should not be misled by pretty talk, he may decide not to play hide-and-seek any longer; he leaves his role, does not partake any longer as narrator in the stream of the sub-actions and tells us himself, in the voice of the narrator, that something is a lie.¹

Cultural Context

29:18 Seven years – the groom and his family traditionally provided a contribution to the bride wealth often referred to as the bride price. Jacob has brought no wealth with him (the inheritance he will eventually gain as heir to Isaac has not yet been divided), so the agreement is reached that his seven years' labor will serve in lieu of a bride price. The substitution of seven years of Jacob's labor or the bride price results in about twice the normal going rate for brides.

29:22 According to ancient customs marriage was celebrated as a joyful business transaction between families rather than as a civil or sacred ceremony. No vows were made. The agreement was often struck years before the marriage took place. When the agreed time came, a feast marked the culmination of the agreement after which the marriage was consummated (often within the family compound of the bride's parents). It was not unusual for the wife to continue living with her family as the husband made conjugal visits for several months until the woman conceived. Her pregnancy was the signal that the time was right for her to move into the household of her new husband.

30:3-8 Because of her barrenness, Rachel offers Jacob her servant Bilhah as a substitute wife (v. 3). This was a common practice in ancient Near Eastern culture. Abraham and Sarah had also followed this custom (see 16:1-4). Children born to the second wife were regarded as belonging to the first wife, preserving the family line. Therefore, Rachel names the two boys born to Bilhah (30:6, 8).²

¹ J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative An Introductory Guide*, (WJK), 65.

² J. I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, and Ajith Fernando, eds., *ESV Global Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 75.

Week 20
29-30

Women's Bible Study - Genesis

30:25 A woman's status in marriage is not fully attained until she bears a son. In some contracts a time limit is set after which she can be divorced should an heir not be provided. It would have been inappropriate for Jacob to leave with Rachel since her status would be more secure with the birth of a son.

Keep in mind, however, that just because the culture deems a practice as normal or right does not mean it is. All we do and say should be tested against what the word of God says.

Observe

1. What are the recurring themes in chapters 29 and 30?

2. What additional insights have you learned about Jacob's character in chapter 29 and 30, how would you summarize his actions?

[Deuteronomy 18:10-14](#) *"There must never be found among you anyone who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, anyone who practices divination, an omen reader, a soothsayer, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, one who conjures up spirits, a practitioner of the occult, or a necromancer. Whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord and because of these detestable things the Lord your God is about to drive them out from before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God. Those nations that you are about to dispossess listen to omen readers and diviners, but the Lord your God has not given you permission to do such things."*

3. What have you learned about Laban's character, how would you summarize his character and actions?

4. What are the positive and negative aspects of Leah and Rachel's character?

5. List the effects ungodly actions have had on the characters in chapter 29 & 30.

Interpretation

[Gal 6:7-10 ESV] 7 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. 10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

6. How did you see God working in the lives of Leah and Rachel, when and under what circumstances does God intervene?

7. How did you see God working in the lives of Jacob and Laban?

Application

8. Where do you look for your solution to life's problems?

My Help Comes from the LORD

Psalm 121

A SONG OF ASCENTS.

1 *I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?*

2 *My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

3 *He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*

4 *Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

5 *The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.*

6 *The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

7 *The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

8 *The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.³*

³ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), [Ps 121:title-8](#).

