

THE CHRONOLOGY AND BIRTH OF JACOB'S CHILDREN BY LEAH AND HER HANDMAID

Charles L. Zimmerman
Pastor Evangelical Church
Archbold, Ohio

In Genesis 29:31-30:24 the birth of twelve of Jacob's children is recorded. These children are the offspring of four different women, Leah and Rachel, his wives, and Zilpah and Bilhah, their respective handmaids.

It will be remembered that Jacob had bargained with Laban to serve him seven years for his daughter Rachel. Upon being deceived by Laban at the end of that seven years, Jacob was given Leah, the older daughter of the family. Through further bargaining and mutual agreement, for seven more years of service Jacob was given Rachel, the woman he loved, one week later.

In Genesis 30:25,26 it seems the last seven years of service had been completed and the twelve children had been born. This fact will be challenged by some of the suggested interpretations. Jacob then says to Laban, his father-in-law, "Send me away, that I may go into my own place and to my country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served thee, and let me go: for thou knowest my service where-with I have served thee.

Now it is not difficult to understand how Jacob could have had twelve children in seven years from four different women. No doubt a number of the children could have been born contemporaneously. However, it is amazing to read that Leah gave birth to seven of the twelve children which were born at that time. Of course, there is nothing

Charles L. Zimmerman holds the B. A. degree from Wheaton College, and the B. D. and Th. M. degrees from Grace Theological Seminary. He is presently pastor of the Evangelical Church of Archbold, Ohio.

biologically impossible about having seven children in seven years, but the real problem arises when we learn that during that seven year period, "Leah saw that she left off bearing, so she took Zilpah her handmaid, and gave her to Jacob to wife. And Zilpah, Leah's handmaid, bare Jacob a son. And Leah said, 'Fortunate!' and she called his name Gad. And Zilpah Leah's handmaid bare Jacob a second son. And Leah said, 'Happy am I! For the daughters will call me happy! and she called his name Asher'" (Gen. 30:9-13). How could Leah have borne seven children and have had a barren period in which her handmaid bore two children, all in seven years? Or did these events occupy some period other than seven years?

It may be granted that this is not a problem of great theological significance, but nevertheless it dare not be overlooked if the authority and integrity of the Word of God is highly valued. In fact, whether naturally or supernaturally, it must be answered if the inerrancy of the Scripture is not to be sacrificed.

SUGGESTED INTERPRETATIONS

1. The births took place during two twenty year periods of service that Jacob gave Laban.

The basis of this interpretation is found in Gen. 31:38, 41. In these verses Jacob mentions twenty years of service to Laban two times. This interpretation holds that the two sets of twenty years are different periods and make a total of forty years in Laban's house. Each mention of twenty years is introduced with the word *zeh*, which word, when repeated, is used by way of distinction; as when we say, this or that; the one or the other. The following passages are cited as confirming this translation. "So that the one came not near the other" (Ex. 14:20). "This hath more rest than the other" (Eccl. 6:5). The word *zeh* is used twice at a greater distance, "one dieth . . . and another dieth" (Job 21:23,25). Clark goes on to explain it as follows:

So here in Genesis 31 :38 Jacob says to Laban, "during the one set of twenty years I was with thee. . . ." Meaning the time in which he lived, not in Laban's house, but in his neighborhood; not as a servant but as a friend; after he had served in Laban's house fourteen years for his cattle. But then, as to the other twenty, he tells Laban at verse 41, "during the other twenty years for myself (own benefit) in thy house; I served thee fourteen, and six years." And during the last period though only six years, he charges Laban with changing his wages ten times.¹

It should be observed that this interpretation is proposed, not only to answer this problem, but also to solve many related problems with the Biblical chronology of the period of the Bible patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob. For instance, this longer period of time at Laban's house gives relief to a very crowded chronology of events in the life of Jacob. With this system of calculation Jacob would have left his home to find his wife twenty years earlier, or at approximately fifty-seven years of age. This age for Jacob to go looking for a wife harmonizes better with the marriage age (40) of both Isaac and Esau than the traditional view of seventy-seven.

Also, if Jacob had no son till he was eighty-five, and he went to Egypt at one hundred and thirty, with sixty-six persons, only forty-five years are allowed for his family, whereas the larger sum of sixty-five years seems necessary for the births of so many children and grandchildren. This view also has the advantage of assigning such ages to Simeon, Levi, Dinah, Benjamin, Judah, Er, and Onan as harmonize with the events described in chapters 34 and 35.

Then there is the problem of harmonizing the dates of the patriarchs with the exodus. John Rea has dealt with this matter in his doctoral dissertation, "The Historical Setting of the Exodus and the Conquest." Calculating from external sources, it would seem that Jacob was only a young man of about eighteen years of age when he left home. Of course, that age does not tally with the Scriptural indication of his age. The Bible tells us that when Jacob was presented in the court of Pharaoh, "the days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my father:s in the days of their sojournings" (Gen. 47:9, RSV). By making calculations based on the life of Joseph we learn that there was an interval of about thirty-three years between the time when Jacob returned from Haran and when he went down to sojourn in Egypt. If Jacob was one hundred and thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh, then he must have been ninety-seven when he came back to Canaan. If Jacob was with Laban only twenty years, then he was seventy-seven years old when he left home. This is an extreme contradiction with the ancient history calculation of eighteen years of age. This conflict can be relieved a bit by making Jacob's stay with Laban forty years instead of twenty. He would have gone from home at fifty-seven. It is interesting to note, however, that Rea is not at all interested in accepting this interpretation to help resolve some of the distance between the calculation from ancient history and the seeming Scriptural chronology. He briefly discards the view in a footnote, saying, "I cannot agree that there are two different periods of twenty years each referred to in Genesis 31:38 and 41, the view of R. Payne Smith."² What seems to be the

reason for so little consideration of a view that seemingly aids in solving a number of quite thorny problems?

The main refutation and weakness of this interpretation lies in the grammar of the text. As has been noted, the proponents of this view lay great emphasis upon the construction of the two clauses which mention the twenty years of service. Each clause is introduced with the word *zeh*. They proceed to claim that when *zeh* is repeated, it is used by way of distinction; as when we say this or that; the one or the other; and Scripture passages are cited to confirm this translation.

The writer was impressed by the fact that not one Hebrew scholar whom he confronted with the suggested translation for this theory could find any justifiable evidence in the text for such a translation. The whole scheme breaks down when once it is observed that in each of the passages used to confirm their point, when *zeh* is repeated, it is always connected with the *waw* conjunctive. The *waw* conjunctive is the device used in the language in such cases to convey the idea of distinction. Without the *waw* conjunctive there is nothing to indicate this idea. In Genesis 31:38 and 41, where the two clauses mentioning the twenty years of service are introduced by *zeh*, there is no *waw* conjunctive. Therefore, it may be reasonably concluded that these two clauses are not arranged to imply two different periods of twenty years but rather to emphasize the significance of the one twenty year period in the mind of Laban. The following is an arrangement of the chronology of Jacob's life according to this view:

Year		Event
0		Jacob and Esau born
40		Esau marries 2 Hittite wives
57		Jacob goes to Haran
58		Esau marries Ishmael's daughter
63		Ishmael dies at 137 years. of age
64	Fourteen years service for his wives	Jacob marries Leah and Rachel
65		Reuben born
66		Simeon born
67		Levi born
69		Dan born
71		Naphtali born
72		Gad born
74		Asher born
78	Twenty years service as a friend	Reuben, at 13, finds mandrakes
79		Issachar born
81		Zebulun. (82, Dinah)
86		Judah marries Shuah at 18
87		Er born (88, Onan; 89, Shelah)
91		Joseph born of Rachel

THE CHRONOLOGY AND BIRTH OF JACOB'S CHILDREN

Year	Event
91-97	Six years of service for the cattle
97	Jacob comes from Haran to Succoth (Dinah defiled)
98	Benjamin born, Rachel dies
105	Tamar married to Er (106 to
108	Joseph (17) sold into Egypt
109	Shelah at 20 not given to Tamar
110	Pharez and Zaran born of Tamar
120	Isaac dies (180)
121	Joseph (30) made governor of Egypt
123	Beriah, 20, marries
125	Heber (127, Malchiel) born to Beriah
128	Pharez at 18 marries
129	Hezron (130), Hamul) born to Pharez
130	Benjamin at 32 has 10 sons, and Jacob goes to Egypt
147	Jacob dies ³

II. Four of the births took place during the last seven year period of service for Jacob's wives and the remaining births occurred during the six year period of service for Jacob's flocks.

Those who hold to this view suggest that if Jacob's first child was born in the first year of his second period of service, and if the other births followed in the order in which they are enumerated in chapter 30, it is impossible that Leah could have borne her six sons and one daughter and Rachel could have borne afterwards Joseph by the end of the period, so that the new contract could be made at the beginning of the fifteenth year. It is, therefore, suggested that some of the births must be allowed to occur in the third period of service. It is felt that the "text has nothing against this; for the expression, my service, i.e. (30:26) my time of service, need not necessarily be restricted to the seven years of 29 :18 and 27. It is thus clear that this verse is not from the author of 31:41."⁴

This view assumes too much. First, it assumes the impossibility of the birth of twelve children in seven years. This conclusion is made upon the felt demand that the births followed each other in the order enumerated. There is nothing in the text to forbid the possibility of contemporaneous births on more than one occasion. A more positive proof of this possibility will appear later. Secondly, it assumes that the expression, "my service, " (30:26) need not be restricted to the seven year periods, but may be as well projected to include the following six year

period. But the text does not read this way. In 30:25 it is not until Rachel has borne Joseph, that Jacob asks to be sent away. It is then following this (30:27-30) that Laban bargains with Jacob to stay another six years. Joseph had to be born before the six year period of Jacob's service for Laban's cattle. Thirdly, it assumes that the author of 30:26 is not the author of 31:41. The critical evidence for this is not final and is based upon a superficial reading of the text. This conclusion is not valid and is dangerous for the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. The following is an arrangement of the chronology for the dates of the births:

Year ⁵	Name of Child	Wife or Handmaid of Jacob
1	Reuben	Leah
2	Simeon	Leah
3	Levi	Leah
4	Dan	Bilhah
4	Judah	Leah
5	Naphtali	Bilhah
6	Gad	Zilpah
7	Asher	Zilpah
8	Issachar	Leah
9	Zebulun	Leah
10	Dinah	Leah
11	Joseph	Rachel

III. The birth of the six sons of Leah took place during the last seven year period of service for Jacob's wives, and the birth of Dinah, the daughter, was sometime after this period.

This view, it seems to the writer, is only held in order to relieve the congested period of seven years in which it would seem that Leah had seven children. The grammatical construction, however, would not seem to prevent this conclusion. The proponents say, "with regard to the birth of Dinah, the expression "afterward" (*hr*, 30:21) seems to indicate that she was not born during Jacob's second seven years of service, but during the remaining six years of his stay with Laban."⁶

This problem with this view arises when we come to chapter 34. Here we read that Jacob had left Padan-aram and was dwelling in peace at Shechem. At this time Shechem, the Hivite, the son of the prince, took Dinah with him and seduced her. This event had to take place at least a year before Joseph was seventeen (37:2). If Dinah was born any length of time after Joseph, say the second year of Jacob's, six year service for Laban's cattle, this would make Dinah fourteen years old or

even less when this experience with Shechem occurred. This would seem quite unlikely biologically and would cause one to wonder why Jacob did not keep a closer eye upon such a young girl. It is felt by the writer that there was a wilful cooperation in this act of defilement. The following is a chronology of the births according to this arrangement.

Year ⁷	Month	Name of Child	Wife or Handmaid of Jacob
1	9	Reuben	Leah
2	7	Simeon	Leah
3	5	Levi	Leah
3	8	Dan	Bilhah
4 ⁸	3	Judah	Leah
4	7	Naphtali	Bilhah
5	9	Gad	Zilpah
6	10	Asher	Zilpah
6	12	Issachar	Leah
7	9	Zebulun	Leah
7	11	Joseph	Rachel
9	6	Dinah	Leah

WRITER'S INTERPRETATION

The Interval of Time

The seven births took place within the second seven year period that Jacob served Laban for his wives. The fallacy of accepting the possibility of two twenty year periods of service for Laban was explained under interpretation I. Under interpretation II, we showed the danger of assuming too much. To say that some of the births took place during the six year period of Jacob's service for cattle goes beyond what the text says. A simple literal interpretation of the text would lead one to conclude that the births all occurred during the second seven year period of service.

The Arrangement of the Period

Since we have determined the period to be confined to the seven years, the arrangement of the births in the seven years must be dealt with. Now if all the children, whose births are given in 29:32-30:24, had been born one after another during the period mentioned, not only would Leah have had seven children in seven years, but there would have been a considerable interval also, during which Rachel's maid and her

own maid gave birth to children. This, of course, would have been impossible and the text does not really demand it.

When we bear in mind that the imperfect tense with the *waw* consecutive expresses not only the order of time, but also the order of thought as well. it becomes apparent that in the history of the births, the intention to arrange them according to the mothers prevails over the chronological order. Therefore, it by no means follows that because the passage, "when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children" (30:1) occurs after Leah is said to have had four sons, that it was not until after the birth of Leah's fourth child that Rachel becomes aware of her barrenness.

There is nothing on the part of grammar to prevent the arrangement of events in this way. Leah's first four births follow as rapidly as possible one after the other. In the meantime, not necessarily after the birth of Leah's fourth child, Rachel, having discovered her own barrenness, had given her maid to Jacob; so that possibly both Dan and Naphtali were born before Judah. The rapidity and regularity with which Leah had borne her first four sons, would make her notice all the more quickly the cessation that took place (30:9). Jealousy of Rachel, as well as the success of the means which she had adopted, would impel her to attempt in the same method to increase the number of her children. Moreover, Leah herself may have conceived again before the birth of her handmaid's second son and may have given birth to her last two sons and her daughter, Dinah, in the fifth, sixth, and seventh years of their marriage. Contemporaneously with the birth of Dinah, or immediately afterwards, Rachel may have given birth to Joseph. The following is a chronology of Jacob's life according to this view and a chart indicating the arrangement of the births of the twelve children in seven years.

Chronology of Jacob's Life

Year	Event
0	Jacob and Esau born
40	Esau marries 2 Hittite wives
63	Ishmael dies, age 137
77	Jacob goes to Haran
84	Jacob marries Leah and
84	Reuben born
85	Simeon born
86	Levi born
86	Dan born
87	Judah born
87	Naphtali born

Year	Event
88	Gad born
89	Asher born
89	Issachar born
90	Zebulun born
90	Dinah born
96	Joseph born
97	Jacob returns to Haran
98	Jacob dwells at Succoth
99	Jacob comes to Shechem and continues 8 yrs.
101	Judah marries Shuah's daughter
102	Er born (103, Onan; 104, Shelah)
106	Shechemites destroyed by Levi and Simeon
107	Benjamin. born, Rachel dies
108	Joseph sold at 17
111	Tamar married to Er
114	Tamar's incest
115	Pharez and Zaran born to Judah
120	Isaac dies at 180
121	Joseph made governor in Egypt
130	Jacob goes to Egypt
147	Jacob dies

Arrangement of Births

Year ⁹	Month	Name of Child	Wife or Handmaid of Jacob
1	9	Reuben	Leah
2	7	Simeon	Leah
3	5	Levi	Leah
3	6	Dan	Bilhah
4 ¹⁰	3	Judah	Leah
4	5	Naphtali	Bilhah
5	3	Gad	Zilpah
6	1	Asher	Zilpah
6	3	Issachar	Leah
7	1	Zebulun	Leah
7	11	Dinah	Leah
7	12	Joseph	Rachel

DOCUMENTATION

1. Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary* (New York: 1850) Vol. I, p. 210.
2. John Rea, "The Historical Setting of the Exodus and the Conquest," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, Winona Lake, Indiana, 1956, p. 82.
3. Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary* (New York: Lane and Scott. 1850) Vol. I, p. 211.
4. A. Dillmann, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897). p. 245.
5. Calculation begins from the first year of Jacob's marriage to Leah.
6. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Pentateuch* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1885). p. 311.
7. Calculation begins from the first year of Jacob's marriage to Leah.
8. Leah's barren period is from 4-5 to 4-12.
9. Calculation begins from the first year of jacob's marriage to Leah.
10. Leah's barren period is from 4-3 to 5-7.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Grace Theological Seminary
200 Seminary Dr.
Winona Lake, IN 46590
www.grace.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu