



Critiquing the myth of innocence (part 1):  
the dysfunction of Jacob's family  
Genesis 29-30

introduction

I have been reading a bit in what is called "Critical Race Theory." It, and the hateful reaction to its truths, has sent my mind, as things often do, back to scripture. In this case, back to the Bible and the nation called Israel.

Critical race theory provides invaluable and factual historical data. I have learned much from it. But the "data" has only served to confirm what I already knew: America is and always has been racist. It is and always has been a project in white supremacy. For large portions of its citizenry, it has never been the land of the free.

I am, of course, also familiar with the voices that shout "blasphemy," as loudly and aggressively as the project itself has suppressed and oppressed. These dissenting voices are akin to those of the false prophets in Jeremiah's day who

"healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying,  
'Peace, peace;'  
when there is no peace.

Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination?

Nay, they were not at all ashamed,  
neither could they blush...”<sup>1</sup>

It is one thing to be flawed. Everyone is flawed. Every nation has its flaws. God can deal and work with that. But it is quite another thing to refuse to acknowledge those flaws, and to create a myth of innocence. This, God cannot abide.

Yet, much of America, having imbued the idea of “America” with a sort of religious fervor, idolatrous in nature, holds fast to a false mythology of American election and innocence. It has used these quasi-theological propositions to justify all sorts of perversion, including racism. Its citizens hold fast to the false mythology of innocence for a number of reasons, not least of which, in my view, is a lack of trust in God. They do not trust Him to be merciful toward the guilty, and so must expunge guilt through the lie of innocence. As natural men and women they consider God to be an enemy. With their false notions of God and the myth of American innocence, they have created their own version of the “Golden Calf.” Idolatry, the worship of false gods, is always and forever at the heart of human sin.

Critical race theory does not necessarily question America’s election. But it does, to be sure, question its innocence. It calls the nation to be true to the purposes for which it was founded. In this, it possesses a prophetic quality very much like that found in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible never questions Israel’s election, only its innocence. It calls Israel to be true to the calling to which God called it. It calls Israel to repent when it is untrue to its high calling.

Like critical race theory, the prophetic spirit found in the Hebrew Bible did not shy away from the reality of guilt. It made no attempt to replace it with a mythology of innocence. Ancient Israel, like America, was deeply flawed. The prophetic spirit sought to expose the flaws and call it to repentance so that it might become what it was called to be.

Unfortunately, ancient Israel, like the America of today, refused to repent; choosing willful ignorance of guilt, avoidance of confession, and the creation of a myth of innocence. Like

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 6.<sup>14-15</sup>

America, Israel would not accept correction.

The Hebrew Bible, then, engaged in its own version of “critical race theory.” Its critique of Israelite society was most unwelcome and inconvenient. But, the critique boldly faced off with a people who, out of love for self-serving delusion and distrust of God, maintained—much longer than Americans have—a false mythology of innocence. The prophetic critique exposed the lie of innocence, revealed the truth of guilt, and called a nation to trust God, confess its sins, repent, and act justly. Those who offered this critique were often accused of being unpatriotic, unfaithful, and heretical. But their unyielding allegiance was to God, Himself, rather than theories or mythologies or institutions or nations.

In this series of homilies, we will examine a few examples of this Biblical critique of an imperfect people, and how it applies today. This critique was based on love and hope rather than hate and despair. It was based upon an unwavering faith in God and His ability and willingness to make of people and nations something more than what nature had made them. People and nations could rise from their animal to a more divine nature.

### What’s in a name?

In a new dispensation of grace, God extended a call to one, Abraham (‘abrāhām). God called him to “be a blessing.” Indeed, through his answering of the call “all families of the earth [were to] be blessed.”<sup>2</sup> This call Abraham passed on to his son, Isaac (Yiṣḥāq). Isaac passed it on to his son Jacob (Ya‘aqōb).

For the most part, the text holds Abraham up as a paradigm of virtue. Isaac, less so. Jacob? Not so much. The Biblical narratives that report on Jacob, begin while Jacob is still in the womb. But, rather than beginning at the beginning, we will jump forward a few years.

For reasons we will examine later, Jacob, running for his life, has left his father’s house and returned to the family’s ancestral homeland. Here, he has married, twice, once out of

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12.<sup>2-3</sup>

deception and once out of love.

No doubt, the reader is familiar with the almost comical story of masquerade that accompanied Leah's marriage to Jacob. Jacob, having fallen in love with Rachel (Rāḥēl) and being granted her hand in marriage, enters the marriage bed on his wedding night only to discover the next morning that he has slept with Leah (Lē'â), Rachel's older but less attractive sister, who masqueraded as the younger sister, Rachel. This is the stuff of comic Italian opera. Disappointed, and feeling cheated, Jacob renegotiates with Laban, father to Leah and Rachel, for Rachel's hand in marriage. As a result of these intrigues and negotiations, Jacob ends up with two wives and their accompanying "handmaids" in his burgeoning household.

As fun as this prelude is, it gets even better. It is at this point that our heading to this portion of our homily comes into play: "What's in a name?"

As we will see, names can carry a boatload of information.

After the trickery of his wedding night and the negotiations for Rachel's hand in marriage, the text reports that Jacob "went in also unto Rachel, and *he loved also Rachel more than Leah.*" Now, this troubling family dynamic might seem a simple matter of human preference. However, the text informs us that "when the *LORD saw that Leah was hated*, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren."<sup>3</sup>

We note, first, that Yahweh took note of Leah's inferior status and acted upon it. We will witness over and over again in the course of the Hebrew Bible how utterly typical of Yahweh this preference for the distressed and oppressed is. He is inevitably the champion of the despised, the oppressed. He is drawn to such individuals and groups. It is this divine disposition, in fact, that drew him to Israel in the first place.

We invite the reader to put themselves in Leah's sandals. How do you feel, knowing that your husband prefers another woman's company, your sisters, to yours while actually feeling

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 29.<sup>30-31</sup>

an aversion<sup>4</sup> for your company? What are your feelings toward your husband? Your sister? How comfortably do you sit down at the family dinner table? When you meet your sister, Rachel, at the well of water, what frosty glances pass between you and her? How civilized are your conversations?

This is not a happy home. Not for Leah, to be sure. In her marriage, she is true to her name, “weary.” But, as we will see, in the end no one is happy. Jacob’s choices and preferences cause emotional and psychological scars up and down the family line and impact family dynamics for generations. But, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Due to Yahweh’s attentions to Leah, she bears a child. It is a son, the preferred gender in that society. She names him, Reuben (R<sup>e</sup>’ûbēn). His name means, “Look! It’s a boy!” But the child and his name signify something far more than gender identity. “For,” she says at his naming, “Yahweh has seen my humiliation. Now, finally, my husband will love me.”<sup>5</sup>

Now, let’s be honest here. Leah is unhappy, unfulfilled. Her marriage to Jacob is a source of humiliation. Indeed, these feelings of humiliation persist a year or so into her marriage. She knows her husband loves her sister more than her. She is hopeful that by having a son she can win him over and earn his love. How sad! How do you feel about Jacob and his treatment of a perfectly innocent woman?

Seems like some major marriage counseling is in order. But, it was not to be.

A year, or two, or three later, Leah bears another son—apparently Jacob at least finds her useful for the occasional sexual escapade. This son’s name is, Simeon (Šim’ôn), “[I have been] heard,” “[I have been] listened to.” It is Yahweh, of course, who has done the listening. And what has he heard? “The Lord hath heard that I am hated.”<sup>6</sup>

This naming, then, reminds us that several years into her marriage with Jacob, Leah has still

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<sup>4</sup> It is Yahweh, Himself, who observes that Leah is “hated.” This is Hebrew, *šānē’*, which represents feelings that are opposite of “love.” It “refers to an emotional condition of aversion” (*TDOT*).

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 29.<sup>32</sup>; author’s translation

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 29.<sup>33</sup>

not received what any reasonable woman should expect from her husband: love. What is wrong with this man? A man who is supposed to be a man of God, one who is supposed to be “a blessing” to others? He isn’t even a blessing to one who ought to be closest to him: his wife. What successes could compensate for this failure in the home!

Time marches on. Leah bears a third son. She names him Levi (Lēvî), “a union,” “a joining together.” But, again, we see the nature of the union that Leah longs for and signifies in the name: “Finally, this is the thing that will bring my husband closer to me.”<sup>7</sup>

Though the couple has been married for three, five, six years, Rachel mourns as her husband continues to feel and demonstrate little attachment to her.

With the birth of her fourth son, Judah (Yehûdâ), meaning “praise,” it seems that, at least temporarily, Leah decides that she will look to God rather than her detached husband for joy and a sense of personal worth: “Now will I praise the Lord.”<sup>8</sup>

With the text, we pause here to wonder how Rachel, the favored wife, is doing. Surely, she is happy. Surely Jacob is all that she would hope a husband to be. Surely the two of them are living in marital bliss—I meant seven years of service for her hand in marriage passed in flash “for the love he had to her.”<sup>9</sup>

“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, ‘Give me children, or else I die.’

“And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, ‘Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?’”<sup>10</sup>

Huh-oh.

We must not read Rachel’s explosion as sudden, singular, or surprising. It is part of a pattern.

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 29.<sup>34</sup>; author’s translation

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 29.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Genesis 29.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 30.<sup>1-2</sup>

She envies her sister every day of her life. She stares daggers at her. She is constantly complaining to Jacob. So, the anger that Jacob feels toward Rachel is not that of a single moment or single day. This argument is representative of a continuing quarrel. It is part of a pattern. Their relationship is strained—she envious and demanding, he irritated and angry. Tensions run high in this family—tension between Leah and Jacob (which we already knew), tension between Leah and Rachel (which we surmised), and tension between Rachel and Jacob (which we might not have expected).

Finally, Rachel settles upon a solution to her humiliating infertility. It isn't perfect, but she will utilize the services of a surrogate mother. This is a common practice, as prenuptial agreements from all over the ancient Near East demonstrate. She chooses the handmaid, Bilhah, that her father gifted her at the time of her marriage. Jacob sleeps with Bilhah (what a euphemism for something that involves something quite the opposite of sleeping!). As a result, Bilhah bears two sons. These sons are legally Rachel's sons. Rachel names the first son, Dan (Dān), meaning something like “judged,” or “vindicated, reflecting Rachel's sense that God had finally “taken up her cause.” Rachel names her second son, Naphtali (Naptālî), “my wrestling.” In Rachel's tormented mind, this son is indicative of the fact that, “with great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed.”<sup>11</sup>

Now, that's just sad. A child should have a name that bears some relationship to itself. But instead, Rachel, nearly a decade into her marriage, is so consumed with the antagonism that exists between herself and her sister that she makes the child live his life with a name that signifies and brings to mind that antagonism and contention. The lives of both women seem to revolve around grievance. It is little wonder that the sons seem to live similarly—but, again, we get ahead of ourselves.

We could probably stop here, confident that the reader has gotten the point. This is not a healthy and happy family. It certainly does not seem to deserve the attention of God or the “special status” he has given it. But, since the text prolongs the point, so must we.

When Leah, who has “left bearing” (was this temporary infertility a result of physical

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 30.<sup>8</sup>

problems or the absence of a sexual partner?), sees that Rachel is closing in on her in regard to children, she adopts Rachel's strategy of surrogate motherhood. She gives her handmaid, Zilpah, to Jacob. The handmaid promptly bears back-to-back sons: one, Gad (Gād), "a troop" (likely named to indicate Leah's numerical advantage over Rachel in regard to children), the other, Asher ('āšēr), signifying, "Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed."<sup>12</sup>

These mostly benign names might lead us to think that perhaps Leah has finally come into her own and found some contentment in her life, and some resolution in her sisterly conflict. If so, the text does not long allow us to remain in such blissful ignorance.

Leah's oldest son, Reuben, finds some mandrakes—berries from a plant that was believed to have aphrodisiac and fertility qualities. Seeing the boy's stash, Rachel asks that he share the wealth. Leah unleashes on Rachel. "Isn't it enough that you have stolen my husband? Would you now steal my son's mandrakes too?"<sup>13</sup> How many times, we wonder, in her ten-plus years of marriage, has Leah felt, insinuated, and outwardly spoken such sentiments? Hundreds? And hundreds?

Rachel stomps off, knowing that Leah will use the mandrakes to buy Jacob's sexual interest. Sure enough, right on cue, Jacob "lays with" Leah, who "conceives and bares Jacob the fifth son," Issachar (Yiśāšġâr). Providing insight into the workings of Leah's mind, and punning on the idea of "buying" (her son's mandrakes bought her night of sex with her husband), this son is payment for her having sold her handmaid to her husband.<sup>14</sup> She bears another son, Zebulun (Z<sup>e</sup>bûlûn). His name means "a gift." "Yahweh has given me a wonderful gift." But, with her follow up, it is uncertain whether she thinks of the gift in terms of the son, himself, or the effect the son might have on her relationship with her husband.

"This is the thing that will cause my husband to honor me, because I have born to him six sons."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Genesis 30.<sup>11-13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 30.<sup>15</sup>; author's translation

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 30.<sup>17-18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 30.<sup>20</sup>, author's translation



Again, this is heartbreaking. She has been waiting ten to fifteen long years for her husband's love and affection. Did she, we wonder, finally get the love for which she had been waiting so long and which she thought her sixth son might bring her? We don't know. We only know that she bore a daughter after her sixth son, and, later, agreed to accompany Jacob back to his homeland in Israel.

As for Rachel, we know that she finally bore two sons. The first son, Joseph (Yôseph), she viewed as taking away the humiliation of her infertility. No doubt, this was humiliation that she felt in her public life. But, more strongly, it was probably the humiliation she felt visa-via her older fertile sister, Leah. Finally, Rachel died while giving birth to her second son, whom she named Ben-oni (Ben-ônî), "son of my affliction." His father would rename him, Benjamin (Binyāmîn), "son of the right hand."

As we have seen, ten sons and at least one daughter have been born into Jacob's family. Even if we assume that some pregnancies overlapped—an assumption that the narrative doesn't explicitly corroborate—the narrative that reports the births and naming of the children must cover at least a ten-to-fifteen-year time span. It could be closer to 20.

This means that the tensions, contentions, and conflicts; the hard feelings, the competitive feelings, the feelings of abandonment and loneliness; the sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and worthlessness that we see and hear played out in the naming of children lasted decades into Jacob's marriages. We repeat our mantra: this was not a happy family. It was not a well-adjusted family. It was, rather, a thoroughly dysfunctional family. It is not going too far to say that this family wasn't even a particularly godly family.

It was this family, this dysfunctional, maladjusted family that became the founding family of the nation of Israel. It was this dysfunctional family that God called to serve as evangelists; messengers to carry his renown into the world. It was this dysfunctional family that was to be a blessing, and by whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Was this sort of family really the right one for the mission? How could this family possibly fulfill such a grand mission? Is this the best God could do—choose such a flawed family for

his work of global salvation?

And what are authors and editors thinking in sharing such sordid parts of this family's history? What purpose could it possibly serve, but to undermine the legitimacy of the family's call?

### Conclusion and benediction

We will conclude by making three points in order of importance, last to first.

First. How bold were the writers and editors of this narrative! How bold to include this picture of an elected family, so utterly unhealthy and flawed! How bold to tell the ugly truth!

But, they could not do otherwise; for they were committed to the truth. "Truth"—contrary to our post-truth era's notions that turn truth into whatever it is we wish were so or whatever it is we feel to be so; whatever is emotionally satisfying—"is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come."<sup>16</sup> Or, as the Book of Mormon writer, Jacob, put it,

"The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they *really* are, and of things as they *really* will be..."<sup>17</sup>

Today, historians and commentators that utilize critical race theory to write their histories and critique American society are doing precisely as the bold Israelite chroniclers did who wrote narratives such as the one we have examined in this homily. They simply report things as they really have been.

These are the facts. Part of the great circle of truth. What REALLY was.

Pre-colonial Americans brought human beings from Africa to our shores as slaves. African

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<sup>16</sup> DC 93.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Jacob 4.<sup>13</sup>; emphasis added

families were divided, split, and destroyed to be used as tools, free labor to accomplish economic purposes. These are facts. Part of the great circle of truth. What REALLY was.

Those who wrote the constitution left institutionalized slavery in place for the same economic reasons. America's economy boomed. Cotton was king. Cotton was picked, sent to northern and British textile factories, and manufactured into goods. Profits were enormous. The economic boom and profits were made possible through the free labor of slaves, who were kept in abject poverty and treated as little more than farm animals. Without the free labor of slaves, America's economic rise would have been far less, perhaps impossible. These are facts. Part of the great circle of truth. What REALLY was.

African slaves were freed. But African-Americans were denied their God-given inalienable rights. By the hundreds of thousands, they were hunted and haunted by immoral and violent white people. Local, state, and federal governments established laws and institutions to suppress, oppress, and even kill African-Americans. Over time, these governments were populated by hundreds of mayors, city council members, police chiefs, sheriffs, police officers, representatives, senators, etc., who were active and proud members of the Klan and other violent and extremist groups whose aim it was to terrorize black people and deny them the dignity due all human beings. These are facts. Part of the great circle of truth. What REALLY was.

Individual African-Americans were lynched and killed by the thousands "by persons unknown." None of the murdering bastards were held accountable. Whole communities of African-Americans, such as that found in Tulsa's "Little Wall Street," were ravaged and plundered. The millions and millions of dollars in economic losses suffered by such African-Americans were never recovered. White citizens were enriched by such economic losses. The mutilated bodies of African-Americans were callously tossed into mass unmarked graves and covered with dirt. The very well known "persons unknown," were never investigated, never charged, never convicted, never punished. These are facts. Part of the great circle of truth. What REALLY was.

These, and many, many more—right up to the present—are facts. Ugly truths. Objective

truths. Part of the great circle of truth. What REALLY was. What REALLY IS.

“And whatsoever is more or less than this is the spirit of that wicked one who was a liar from the beginning.”<sup>18</sup>

So, that’s our first point. Those who write American history utilizing “critical race theory” are acting after the manner of the inspired and prophetic authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible. They are faithfully and truly and boldly reporting what is real and what is true.

Second, the man, Jacob/Israel, who gave his name to a nation was flawed. As we have seen in today’s narrative, his flaws were magnified in his family, producing a deeply dysfunctional family. Jacob’s family was replete with animosities, conflicts, contentions, and insecurities of all kinds. Deep, hurtful wounds abounded, lasting lifetimes.

The deep wounds and dysfunction of the founding family were passed on to the nation that bore its name. Like Jacob’s immediate family, the nation of Israel remained dysfunctional from beginning to end, as Jeremiah confessed for an entire nation as it took its last, gasping breaths.

“We lie down in our shame  
and our confusion covereth us:  
for we have sinned against the LORD our God,  
we and our fathers,  
from our youth even unto this day,  
and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God.”<sup>19</sup>

Notwithstanding the dysfunction, God called the man, the family, and the nation as ambassadors to the nations. They were, in word and deed, to make known to humankind, not just His existence, but his interest in humankind. They were to make known the peaceful, whole, and happy life that came to all peoples when they lived a life after God’s own

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<sup>18</sup> DC 93.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah 3.<sup>25</sup>

counsel: a life of doing justice, acting rightly, and conducting oneself humbly. When they were untrue to their calling, prophetic voices rose to expound, warn and invite—expound on the evils they witnessed; warn that if the nation did not repent and engage in active and effective ministry they would suffer hardship and trial and destruction; invite them to repent and return to their chosen profession as ministers.

One can ask, “Why”? If the man, his family, and the nation were so flawed, so dysfunctional in their relationships, why would God have called them. The answer is twofold, it seems to me. First, and most obviously, dysfunctional men, women, children, and nations is all he has to work with. Until, that is, Jesus, who is the perfect man... the perfect “Israelite.” He is all that God intended Israel to be.

The second reason God called such a flawed, dysfunctional man, family, and nation flows from the character of God. He is merciful. His call of flawed individuals and nations is evidence of his mercy. That God is merciful and longsuffering represents a fundamental part of His message to the world. The call of flawed messengers is “to the praise of his glory,” as Paul bears witness.<sup>20</sup> It is understood, of course, that such flawed individuals and nations acknowledge the perfection of God, confess their own unworthiness and inadequacy, and strive to improve and be truer to God’s counsels.

This leads us to our third point. The writers and editors of the Hebrew Bible could confidently point out Israel’s flaws, from those of its “first family” to those of an entire nation at its bitter end, because they were sure that God had called the nation and they were sure of God’s mercy. They need not create a myth of innocence because, first, it would have been a lie, and God had said, “Thou shalt not lie.” Second, they could reject myths of innocence because they believed in a merciful God who left wide avenues of repentance open, possessed a forgiving disposition as high as the heavens were above the earth, and possessed a willingness to continue to work with those who acknowledged weakness and strove for improvement.

Today is as good a time as any for we Americans to exercise faith in God. It is as good a time

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<sup>20</sup> See Ephesians 1.<sup>12</sup>.

as any to reject false myths of national innocence. It is as good a time as any to acknowledge and confess our numerous flaws and dysfunctions. It is particularly a good time to confess the long-standing, private, national, and institutional racism that has brought so much hurt, pain, and death to so many of God's chosen people—for African-Americans, being Americans, are also called to be God's ambassadors, a light to the world. Today is as good a time as any to repent of this racism that diminishes the nation's effectiveness as God's servant to the world. We can do all of this through our faith; our faith that God does indeed possess "a forgiving disposition, and does forgive iniquity, transgression, and sin"<sup>21</sup> in the lives of individuals and the histories of nations that reject the lie of innocence, confess weakness, and strive for the divine potential with which God has bestowed them.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>21</sup> Lectures on Faith, Lecture 3