

# Mercy in the Middle of a Mess— Jacob's Family



# What is this story about?

- Most commentaries and Bible translations entitle this passage of Scripture: *Jacob's children*.
- OT genealogies are common.
- They demonstrate the **historicity** of the Bible.
- They show God's interest in individual **people and their families**.
- And they unfold **God's plan of redemption** through history.

in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years.

## *Jacob's Children*

31 When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. 32 And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben,<sup>3</sup> for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." 33 She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon.<sup>4</sup> 34 Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi.<sup>5</sup> 35 And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she called his name Judah.<sup>6</sup> Then she ceased bearing.

30 When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" 2 Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" 3 Then



## Genesis 12:2-3

<sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. . . .<sup>3</sup> and ***in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.***”

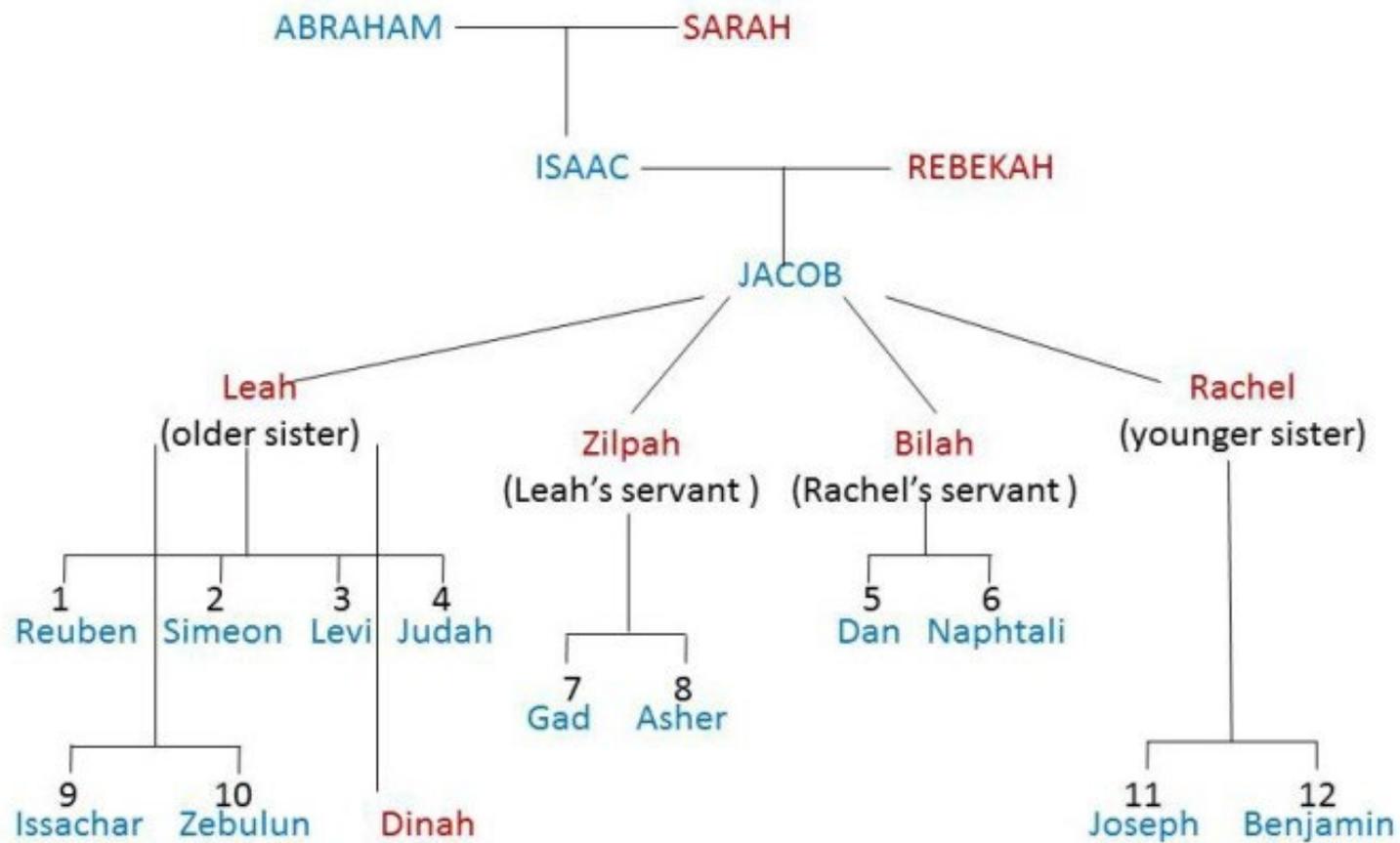
- God called a *man* so that he could make a family: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- From that *family* he made 12 tribes.
- From those *12 tribes* he made the nation of Israel.
- From the *nation* of Israel came Jesus Christ the *Messiah*.
- There is a *scarlet thread of God's saving mercy* that runs all the way through the Old Testament.
- The story of the *birth of Jacob's sons* from whom the 12 tribes would descend is an important part of the story of redemption.

But the story is also about some really messy personal stuff going on in Jacob's family, and how God showed **mercy** to them **in the middle of their mess**.

- The story of Jacob's children *isn't* about *baby showers* and happy *birth announcements*.
- It's a *mess*.
- It's the story of *two women*, who started out as *sisters*, then became *rivals* who each wanted what the other one had.
- *Leah had Jacob's children, but wanted his love.*
- *Rachel had Jacob's love, but wanted his children.*



# 12 Tribes of Israel



# 1. Leah's bears Jacob's first four sons.

## GENESIS 29:31–30:22

<sup>31</sup> When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name **Reuben**, for she said, “Because **the LORD has looked upon my affliction**; for now my husband will love me.” <sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because **the LORD has heard that I am hated**, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name **Simeon**. <sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time **my husband will be attached to me**, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called **Levi**. <sup>35</sup> And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time **I will praise the LORD**.” Therefore she called his name **Judah**. Then she ceased bearing.

- *Reuben* (*rā'â*) to see; to appear; to show and (*bēn*): son: "See, a son."
- *Simeon* (*šim·'ôn*) sounds like (*šěma'*) to hear
- *Levi* (*lah vah*) Heb. Word for "attached."
- *Judah* (*yehû·dā(h)* (*yādâ*). To give thanks, praise



## 2. Rachel bears the next two sons through her maidservant Bilhah.

**30** When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” <sup>2</sup> Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” <sup>3</sup> Then she said, “Here is my servant **Bilhah**; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her.” <sup>4</sup> So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. <sup>5</sup> And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup> Then Rachel said, “**God has judged me**, and has also heard my voice and given me a son.” Therefore she called his name **Dan**. <sup>7</sup> Rachel’s servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. <sup>8</sup> Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings **I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed**.” So she called his name **Naphtali**.

- When *Rachel* saw that she could not bear children, she gave her handmaid *Bilhah* to Jacob.
- *Dan* “judged.” Rachel talks about having a child like he was an award in a personal injury trial.
- *Naphtali* (*năp·tû·lîm*) struggles, wrestling
- If you didn’t know it by now, the naming of Naphtali shows this is a contest.



### 3. Leah bears two more sons through her maidservant Zilpah.

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant **Zilpah** and gave her to Jacob as a wife. <sup>10</sup> Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, "**Good fortune has come!**" so she called his name **Gad**. <sup>12</sup> Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup> And Leah said, "**Happy am I!** For women have called me happy." So she called his name **Asher**.

- Leah then decided that two can play that game, so she jumps back into the childbearing race with her handmaid *Zilpah*.
- *Gad* (*găḏ*) “good fortune.”
- *Asher* (*’āšar*), “to declare happy or blessed.”

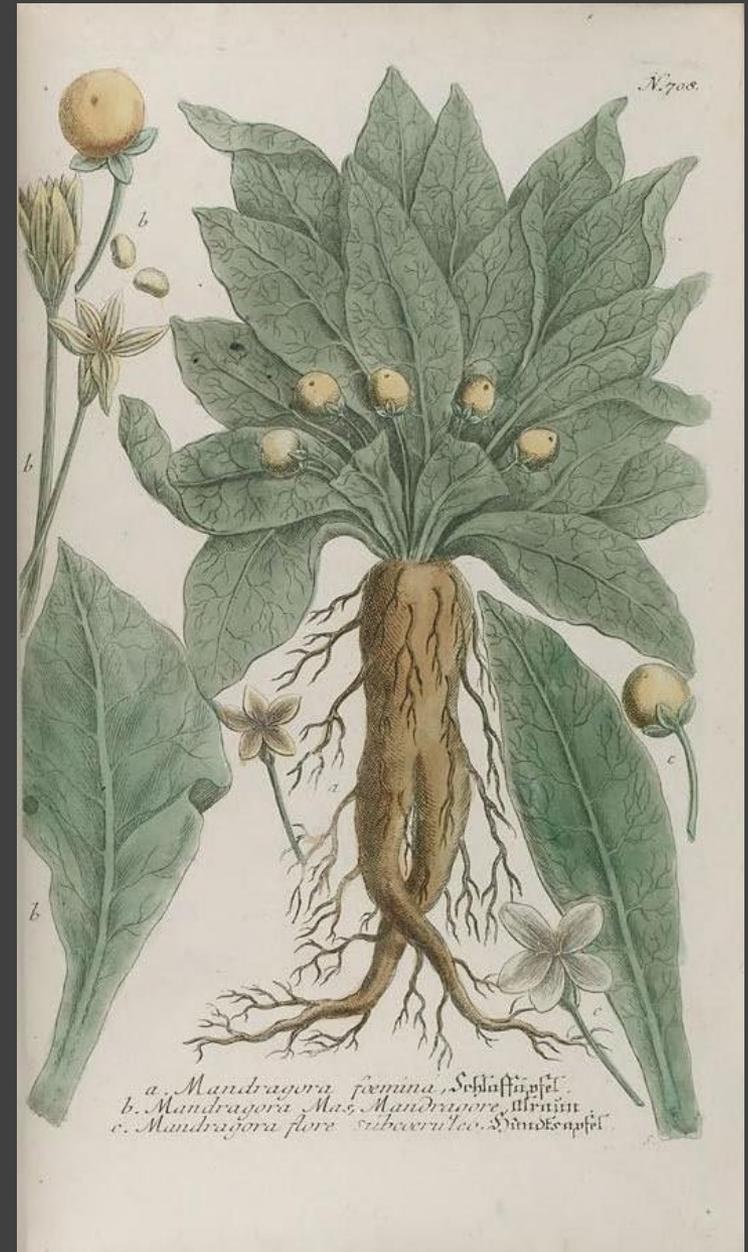


## 4. Leah bears the last two of her six sons.

<sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> But she said to her, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” Rachel said, “Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son’s mandrakes.” <sup>16</sup> When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he lay with her that night. <sup>17</sup> And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. <sup>18</sup> Leah said, “**God has given me my wages** because I gave my servant to my husband.” So she called his name **Issachar**.

<sup>19</sup> And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. <sup>20</sup> Then Leah said, “**God has endowed me with a good endowment**; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons.” So she called his name **Zebulun**. <sup>21</sup> Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name **Dinah**.

- **Mandrake** is a Mediterranean herb believed to have had aphrodisiac and fertility properties. It was sometime called the love apple.
- Rachel and Leah are buying and selling access to Jacob like they were paying *stud fees* for a prize bull.
- **Issachar** (*śā·ḵār*) “wages, the amount offered and given for services rendered.”
- Despite the superstitions of the women, the Lord overlooks their ignorance and answers their desires.
- **Zebulun** (*zē·ḇěḏ*) “gift, present, endowment.”



## 5. Rachel bears Jacobs last two sons.

<sup>22</sup> Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup> She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” <sup>24</sup> And she called his name **Joseph**, saying, “**May the Lord add to me another son!**”

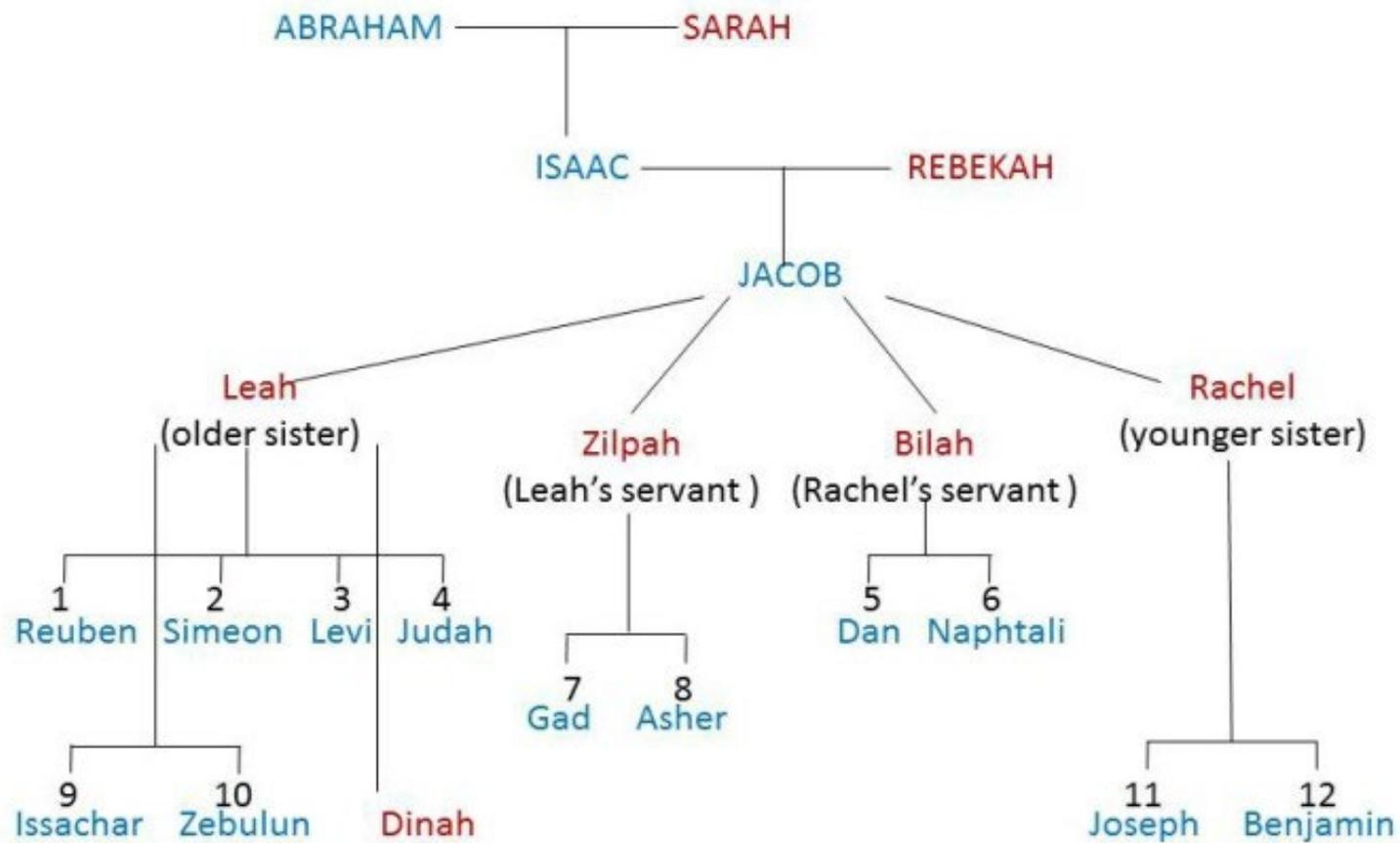
- *Joseph* (*'āsap*), “to increase.”

- The **last son** would come later, after Jacob had returned home.
- **Benjamin** would be born near **Bethlehem**, and Rachel would die in childbirth.

### Genesis 35:18-19

<sup>18</sup> And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name *Ben-oni*; [*son of my sorrow*] but his father called him **Benjamin** [*son of my right hand*]. <sup>19</sup> So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

## 12 Tribes of Israel

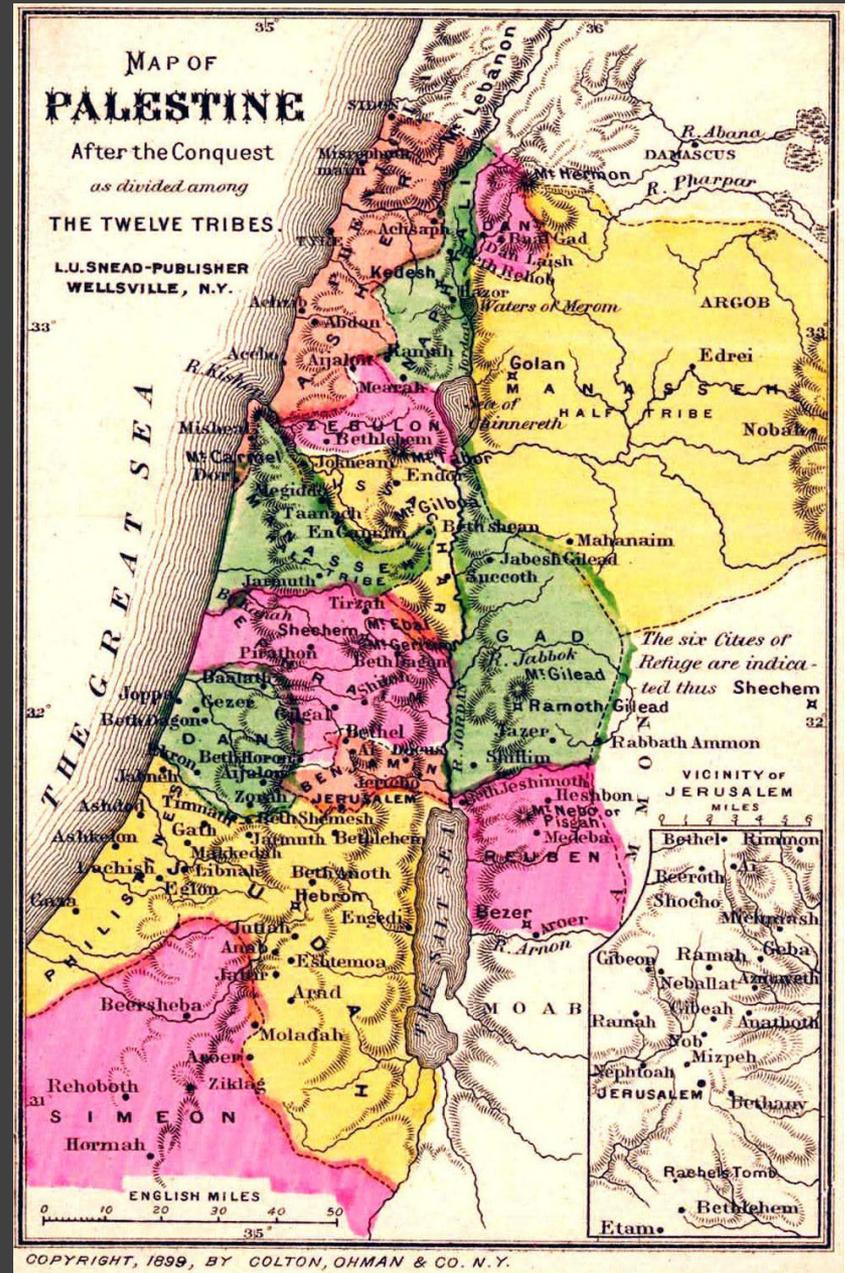


# So, what is God up to in this story?

- Three key verbs that have God as the actor:
  - God **sees**.
  - God **hears**.
  - God **opens**.
- The characters are doing all their very human stuff, usually for their very human motives, but **God is masterminding his mercy to them in the middle of their mess.**

God was also doing something else: his **Sovereign Providence** was working in and through human actions of one family to **save the human race!**

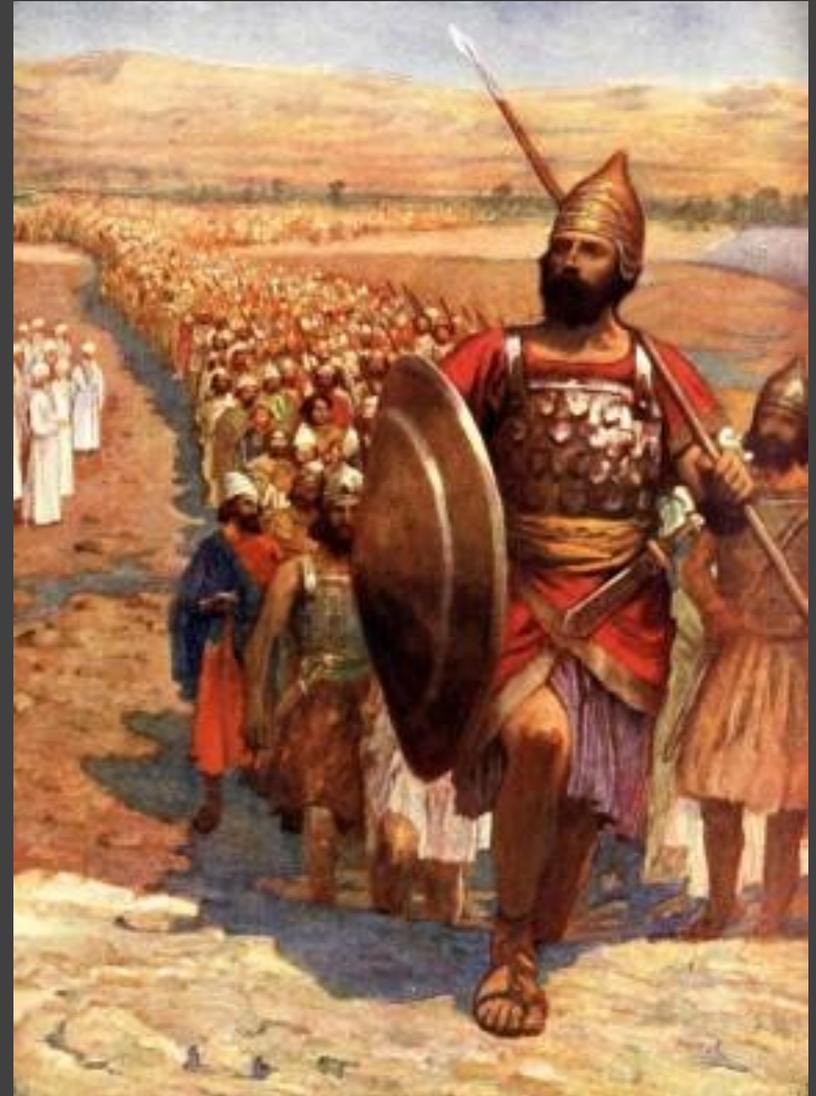
- Jacob, Leah, and Rachel were making a family.
- But in that very human action of making a family, God was creating **twelve tribes** through whom he would create the **nation of Israel**.





Eventually, every person who saw God descend on *Mt. Sinai* and heard the Law and entered into *covenant* with him bore the *DNA* of one of the *twelve boys* of the *two struggling sisters* and their handmaids.

Every *Israelite*  
who crossed over  
the *Jordan* with  
*Joshua* into the  
Promised Land . . .





Every Jew who gathered at *Hebron* to crown **David King** over Israel, saying, “Behold, we are your bone and flesh” (2 Samuel 5:1).



Every member of the *remnant* who returned with **Ezra and Nehemiah** to Jerusalem after the Exile in Babylon



- For 19 centuries, every Jew would carry in his very cells **the genetic code** of the messy family of Jacob, Leah, Rachel, and their handmaids.
- Generations of circumcised Jews would carry in their very **flesh and blood** the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Generation after generation would be born, until one day God's plan to save and bless the whole world through the nation of Israel would come back down to a *young Jewish woman* living in little out-of-the-way place called *Nazareth*.



## Luke 1:30-33

<sup>30</sup> And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the **Son of the Most High**. And the Lord God will give to him the **throne of his father David**,<sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the **house of Jacob** forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”





- The *house of Jacob*.
- The house of the *struggling sisters* Leah and Rachel and their struggling boys.

- One of the most wonderful things about Jesus is that the Savior was both **fully God** and **fully man**.
- When he took on human flesh, he took on a direct physical connection to every human being in this room.



- Though no two people are genetically identical, in terms of our DNA sequence, all humans are 99% similar to any other humans.
- When the Bible tells us that Jesus was both fully God and fully man, that means **he took on that DNA you and I share with the rest of the human race**. We're related.



But the particular family DNA of Jesus came from the Tribe of **Judah**—the tribe of Israel's **Kings**.

- *Judah*. Yes, Leah's boy Judah.
- The one whose name sounds like the Hebrew word for praise.
- Leah, the one with the **weak eyes**.
- Leah, the **unwanted sister** who was married off in a trick.
- Leah, the desperate **unloved wife**.
- The Savior of the world came from the Tribe of Leah's boy Judah.
- *Because God shows favor to the unfavorites.*

Because God masterminds his mercy in the middle of our mess.

