

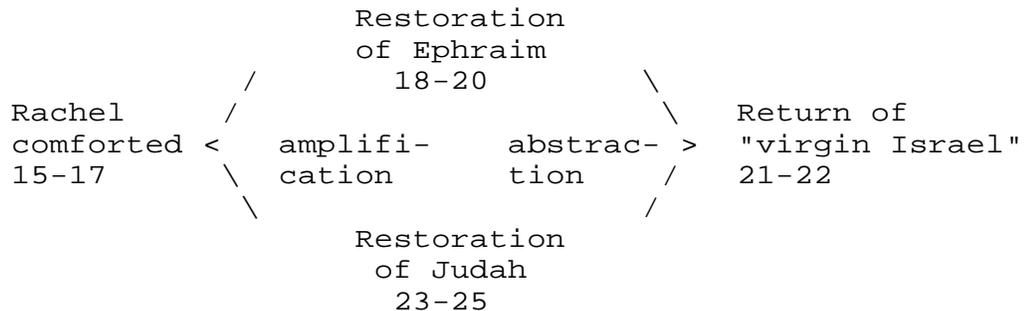
Jer. 31:15-26, A Family Portrait
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Overview

1. This is in the "sin and restoration" section of 30-33. The discussion centers around the family tree of Rachel, one of Jacob's wives. She bore two sons: Joseph (whose sons Ephraim and Manasseh founded leading tribes in the northern kingdom) and Benjamin (who, with Judah, formed the southern kingdom). In this section, we hear all three saying something, and all three receiving a promise from the Lord.
 - a) First we hear Rachel mourning and comforted, 15-17.
 - b) Then we hear Ephraim, representing the northern kingdom, repenting and promised blessing, 18-20.
 - c) The Lord commands the entire nation, the "virgin of Israel," to return to her husband, 21-22.
 - d) Finally, we hear the godly confession of the restored southern kingdom, and the blessing promised to them, in 23-25.
 - e) Overview of the interchange:

Our attitude	Lord's response
1) Discouragement (Rachel)	Gospel
2) Repentance (Ephraim)	Love
3) Return (All)	
4) Worship (Judah)	Blessing

- f) *Technical note:* If we focus on what the Lord says, the promises are related by amplification and abstraction, like this:



2. What we can expect to learn in this section:

- a) What God expects from us: despair, repentance, faith, and worship.

- b) God's faithfulness and compassion toward his children, along the trajectory of Gospel-Love-Blessing.
- c) Continued emphasis on *the land* as the center of the Lord's attention for these promises.

A. 15-17, A Mother's Mourning

1. 15, Rachel weeps for her children.

a) The meaning:

- 1) Rachel is the wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin, Jacob's two favorite sons. Joseph's children Ephraim and Manasseh founded tribes that were prominent in the northern kingdom; Benjamin remained with Judah in the southern kingdom. Thus she is invoked as a figure of the nation, just as her husband Jacob is in 30:10.
- 2) She sees both kingdoms, thus both of her sons, led into captivity, and mourns for them.
- 3) "Ramah," a high city between the kingdoms and one that shifted back and forth between them as a frontier fortification now for one, now for the other (1 Kings 15), is a place from which she can broadcast her mourning so that all can hear.

b) This verse is a striking parallel to the Joseph story in Genesis.

1) The formal parallels:

- a> Gen. 37:35, Jacob "refuses to be comforted" for Joseph "his son," and "weeps." (Only other passage with "refuse to be comforted" in OT is Ps. 77:2, Heb. 3).
- b> Gen. 42:36, just as Rachel's children "are not," so Jacob concludes that his sons Joseph and Simeon "are not," using the same Hebrew word.

2) The parallels in meaning:

- a> From Jacob's perspective, Joseph has been slain by a wild beast, and Simeon will never be seen again.
- b> When Benjamin goes to Egypt, both of Rachel's sons are there.
- c> In fact, Jacob is overly pessimistic. Just as the Lord here promises to restore Rachel's sons, so he restores Jacob's to him.
- d> Thus the turn in Jacob's fortunes, from one bereaved to

one blessed, is presented as an encouragement for the nation now. The exile both of north and of south is not permanent, but will be reversed.

c) One might ask, "Why then use Rachel rather than Jacob in v.15?" A reference to Jacob would make the allusion to Genesis even more secure.

1) We had Jacob in 30:7,10, but turned into a woman with respect to weakness and suffering, 30:6.

2) Set up for viewing the nation as a woman in 21ff.

d) Why does Matthew (2:18) see this as fulfilled in the massacre of the infants of Bethlehem by Herod? Herod was not a Jew, but an Edomite. In Matthew's time, the land is still under the pagan domination that began for Judah in 600 B.C. As we have seen several times, the "restoration" under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah fell far short of what the prophets promise. Matthew, with his overwhelming concern for the kingship of the Lord Jesus, is concerned to point out that the nation is still suffering under pagan rule and in need of its royal Messiah. The specific prophecy about Rachel may have been suggested because Rachel's tomb is near Bethlehem, where the infants were slain (Gen. 35:19).

2. 16-22, She should stop, for restoration is at hand.

a) The Lord urges her to cease weeping. Jacob's sons and daughters could not comfort him in his sorrow; sometimes we have sorrows from which no human comforter can deliver us. How wonderful then to know of the Lord's comfort to us, when he gently tells us to stop crying.

b) The reason: notice the parallelism. He alternates an abstract encouragement with the specific details.

1) The specific details: return from captivity. *Application:* Note the continued emphasis on the geographical aspects of the promise.

2) First abstraction: "Thy work shall be rewarded." Her labor in bearing and rearing the children is not futile or fruitless.

3) Second abstraction: "There is hope in thine end." Present discouragements should not cause her to lose sight of the future blessing that God is preparing.

c) *Application:* The Lord comforts us as well as mourning Rachel. And his comfort is likely to be along the lines of the two principles he proclaimed to her.

1) He will surely reward faithfulness. 1 Cor. 3:9-15; 4:1-5.

Compare the parables of the talents in the Gospels. Heb. 6:10, it would be unrighteous of God to forget our work for him, and he will not.

2) That reward may not appear right away; we must be content to wait for payday. Heb. 10:30-39.

3. *Application:* More generally, this section reminds us of the first step most of us go through in coming to Christ. Like Rachel, we are overwhelmed at the tragedy that surrounds us. We see sorrow, despair, and disorder on every side, with no evidence of any hope. We must recognize that we are lost, and then we hear the gospel, that God has provided a way out of our problems through the Lord Jesus. So Rachel's cry has its analog in the consciousness of lostness that we pass through in coming to Christ. BUT that is not enough to save us, as we shall shortly see.

The succinct promise to Rachel, made twice, is that her children will return to their land. Now we see that restoration amplified, once for the northern tribes in the person of her grandson Ephraim; once for the southern tribes with which her son Benjamin is included; and once in a summary summons to the entire nation.

B. 18-20, The Restoration of the North

Rachel's first son is Joseph, ancestor of Ephraim and Manasseh, two of the northern ten tribes. They were the first ones to be taken into captivity, by Assyria in 722 B.C. So we first learn of their repentance and the Lord's promise to them. As in the previous and following oracle, the subject speaks, then the Lord.

1. 18-19, Ephraim weeps in repentance.

As does Rachel, Ephraim weeps, but with a very different kind of weeping. This is not the mourning of one without hope, whom the Lord must correct and comfort, but the sincere repentance of one who recognizes his sin and turns from it.

To understand this model of repentance, we should observe that it has two parts, each concluding with a reason ("for," "because"). These parts show us two components of godly repentance. The penitent must recognize two things about his sin:

a) 18, God is sovereign in chastening sin.

- 1) Ephraim recognizes that her sufferings come from God, and that she, like an unbroken bullock, needs them.
- 2) More than that, she invites more. So desirous is she of spiritual health that she submits herself under God's rod.
- 3) The reason she can take this position is her recognition that the Lord is her God.

c) Second fact: the Lord's bowels are moved over him. "Have mercy" is cognate to "womb," so both lines refer to deep inner emotion. When Ephraim suffers, so does the Lord.

d) We are left to draw the conclusion. Feelings such as these on the Lord's part are not evidence of animosity, but of deep love. In spite of all that Ephraim has done, when he returns in repentance, he finds his father's arms open wide to him. (Can't help thinking of the parable of the prodigal son, Luke 15.)

3. *Application*: The next step after despairing and hearing the good news is repentance--not rebelling against the Lord's discipline, but submitting to it and hating our sin. When we do turn to the Lord in this way, we can be sure of finding the same tender welcome that Ephraim did. No sin is too great for him to forgive. John 6:37, "he who comes to me, I will in no way cast out."

NB: God reveals his love, not to despairing Rachel, but to repentant Ephraim. The gospel deals with the *facts* of salvation--here, that the deportees will return; in the broader scheme of things, that Christ has died for our sins and risen again. It is only after we repent that we learn of God's *love* that has motivated him to provide so great a salvation for us.

Repentance, while important, is still not the end of the process. It must lead to faith, to personal appropriation of the promised deliverance. This is the focus of the next two verses.

C. **21-22, The Restoration of the Nation**

These two verses form a motivated command. First the Lord summons the nation to return, to lay hold on the promised restoration. Then he gives a motive for them to do so.

1. *Technical note*: We can see in two ways that there is a break between verses 20 and 21.
 - a) In Hebrew, the gender of pronouns and verbs shifts between v.20 (masculine) and v.21 (feminine). Here the object of discussion is the "virgin of Israel," which we may take to be the entire nation, made up of the two parts whose descriptions surround it.
 - b) In contrast with the declarative statements of the other verses, these verses are characteristically imperative.
2. The command is given in detail, and then summarized in a rhetorical question. The nation has repented. She knows that she is a "backsliding daughter." But that is not enough. As long as she "goes about," wandering aimlessly, she will not enjoy the promised blessing. She must lay hold of it. In this case, that means returning to the promised land. In the modern analogy, we lay hold of it by receiving the salvation that Christ offers us.

There is something surprising about the command that we can appreciate only by examining the details.

- a) "Set up waymarks." Perhaps a reference to a common technique for navigating across the desert that lies between Babylon and Israel. With no landmarks, it's easy to end up walking in a circle. So travellers set up pillars as they move along, frequently enough that two or three are visible at a time, and keep them in a straight line.
 - b) "Make thee high heaps." Parallel with the proceeding, and a punning reference to v.15, where "bitter weeping" is literally "weeping of bitterness" and "bitterness" looks the same in Hebrew as "high heaps" here. The nation that once was occupied with pointless weeping and bitterness is now to set up navigational aids for its journey home.
 - c) "Set thine heart toward the highway," "pay attention to the road." As we know only too well from Michigan's legendary potholes, highways need maintenance. The nation is called upon to inspect and repair the road that will carry them back home.
 - d) Now here's the unusual fact: activities such as erecting pillars, piling up stones, and inspecting and repairing highways are hardly woman's work, yet it is the "virgin of Israel" who is called upon to do them! Just as God frustrated human effort by turning men into women in 30:6, here he suggests that women can accomplish that for which they are not naturally suited.
3. The motivation in 22b is an extremely puzzling saying. The church fathers thought it was a reference to the virgin birth, but there is no evidence of that in the context, and the NT does not allude to it as a prophecy. But if we consider it in the context of the command, we may have a clue. It is the man who usually surrounds, protects, provides for the woman, but in this transaction with Israel, God brings them to the point where they must do something in order to return to the land, something for which they are not suited by nature.

Women are legendary for playing "hard-to-get:" you've heard of the fellow who chased a girl until she caught him! But when God brings his people to the point of repentance, he expects them to step out and come to him. In Israel's case, the restoration in view is to the land, and the action required of the nation is to return. He is her husband, and you might expect that she would be totally passive in this restoration, but he commands her, the virgin of Israel, to make her way across the desert and return to him. This was not a trivial command: at the first restoration, many of them did not. But God wants them to surround him, to press upon him, to make their devotion to him explicit. He has already proposed; they need to respond with a resounding "Yes."

4. *Application:* More generally, once God presents us with the gospel and shows us our individual sin, he expects us to make an explicit decision and receive Jesus Christ. Now, we are as

ill-suited to do this as a young woman is to pile up stones in the desert and maintain a highway, and the Scriptures are clear that God is the one who enables us to come to him--but still we must come. We must decide to forsake our sin, just as Israel had to forsake the homes and gardens she built in Babylon. And the way will not be easy. It is a wilderness that requires us to build stone pillars and repair the road in order to reach our destination. God will enable us to cross it, but we must actually do the crossing.

After moving from Ephraim to the entire nation, we come back to Judah, who will shortly suffer attack, siege, and exile under the Babylonians. We have seen the nation recognize its desperate condition, repent of its sin, and be invited to return to the Lord in faith. Now we gain a glimpse of what awaits them once they do return.

D. 23-25, The Restoration of the South

Rachel's despair and Ephraim's repentance are depicted as past. Here the Lord predicts the future fate of Judah, after they have been brought back to the land.

1. 23, Judah's Worship

The prayer recorded here describes Mount Zion, the location of the temple in Jerusalem. The people ascribe two titles to it, and then pray for God's blessing on it.

- a) "Habitation of Justice [Righteousness]": contrast the behavior described in 7:9-11, summarized by our Lord in Matt. 21:13, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves." When Judah is restored, the temple and those who frequent it will be characterized by righteousness, by adherence to God's law.
- b) "Mountain of Holiness": Remember that holiness means separateness. The temple was to be set apart for the service of God, but even during the restoration the temple was profaned with the presence of unbelievers, the warehouses being used for apartments for political friends of the priests (Neh. 13:4-9). To this day the temple mount is profaned with pagan shrines. In the coming day, it will truly be set apart to the Lord.
- c) Strikingly, Judah will pray for the Lord to bless the temple. This is a change of attitude; previously, they have expected blessing to come *from* the temple, not *to* it. In Jer. 7 and 26, Jer excoriates their use of the temple as a magical amulet. Finally, they reach a right perception of the distinction between the Lord and his ceremonies.
- d) *Application*: For most people today, "worship" refers more to a place and a set of activities than it does to our relation with the Lord. It is very easy for modern believers to become so occupied with church buildings and scheduled meetings that

we focus on them rather than on the Lord who gives them to us.

2. 24-25, The Lord's Blessing

Rachel's original mourning was over the exile, and God promised to bring the people back. Now he promises far more--blessing and prosperity once they are back.

Application: Many people think that God owes them this right off, and are angry with him when they do not experience blessing in their daily lives. This passage is helpful in showing us that blessing is the portion of the worshipper, not just the penitent or the one who recognizes the problem. When we recognize the disaster around us, God tells us the good news of deliverance. When we repent of our sin, he assures us of his love. It is as we walk daily with him in worship, not confounding the Giver with the Gifts, that he pours out his blessings upon us.

Summary

The overall sequence of events bears repeating, as a pattern for our experience:

1. When we despair, God brings us the good news that salvation is available.
2. When we repent of our sin, he assures us of his love and of our place in his family.
3. We must turn enthusiastically to him to lay hold of the salvation that he provides for us.
4. When we worship him, he brings us blessing.

Psalm:

1. News of salvation: Ps. 98, "Sing a New Song"
2. God's love: Ps. 103, "The Tender Love"
3. Worship: Ps. 65, "Praise Waits for Thee in Zion" or 118 "The Glorious Gates of Righteousness"

Analysis

30:4-31:25, * quote p: the promise of restoration after suffering to both houses of Israel

quote: let S be suffering, R restoration. A series of oracles, in three groups; the first and third include both suffering and restoration. (Regrouping of 31:15-26)

- A. 30:5-31:1, SRRS SRS RSR
Three cycles of suffering and restoration for Jacob. No explicit mention of either house of Israel (but Zion, 30:17). See previous studies.
- B. 31:2-14, All restoration: the Lord regathers his people. Both

northern and southern kingdoms (Samaria; Zion) are expressly included. See previous studies.

C. 31:15-25, amplification p

Rachel is comforted by promising the restoration of her sons, which is then expounded in more detail.

Note the repeated pattern of someone [Rachel and her northern (Joseph) and southern (Benjamin) sons] speaking, and the Lord's responses to them.

1. 15-17, text p: Rachel

a) 31:15, quote p: Rachel weeps for her children.

1) quote f: 31:15 K.OH)FMAR Y:HWFH

2) quote: reason p

a> text: QOWL B.:/RFMFH NI\$:MF(N:HIY B.:KIY TAM:RW.RIYM
RFX"L M:BAK.FH (AL-B.FNEY/HF M"):ANFH L:/HIN.FX"M
(AL-B.FNEY/HF

b> reason: K.IY)"YN/EN.W. S

b) 31:16-22, quote p: She should stop, for restoration is at hand.

1) quote f: 31:16 K.OH)FMAR Y:HWFH

2) quote:

a> reason p

1> text: MIN:(IY QOWL/"K: MI/B.EKIY W:/("YNAY/IK:
MI/D.IM:(FH

2> reason: K.IY

a: Y"\$ &FKFR LI/P:(UL.FT/"K: N:)UM-Y:HWFH

b: W:/\$FBW. M"/)EREC)OWY"B

c: 31:17 W:/Y"\$-T.IQ:WFH L:/)AX:ARIYT/"K:
N:)UM-Y:HWFH

d: W:/\$FBW. BFNIYM LI/G:BW.L/FM S

2. 18-25, amplification: chiasmic abstraction p

a) 18-20, text1: stimulus-response p: Ephraim

1) stimulus: quote p: the weeping of Ephraim

a> quote f: 31:18 \$FMOW(A \$FMA(:T.IY)EP:RAYIM MIT:NOWD"D

b> quote: coordinate p

1> reason p:

a: text:

1: YIS.AR:T./ANIY

2: WF/)IW.FS"R K.:/("GEL LO) LUM.FD

3: H:A\$IYB/"NIY

4: W:/)F\$W.BFH

b: reason: K.IY)AT.FH Y:HWFH):ELOHFY

2> reason p:

a: text:

1: 31:19 K.IY-)AX:AR"Y \$W.BIY NIXAM:T.IY

2: W:/)AX:AR"Y HIW.FD:(IY SFPAQ:T.IY (AL-YFR"K:

3: B.O\$:T.IY

4: W:/GAM-NIK:LAM:T.IY

b: reason: K.IY NF&F)TIY XER:P.AT N:(W.RFY

- 2) response: evidence p: The Lord examines his own affections toward Ephraim.
- a> text: Coordinate rhetorical question, asserting the Lord's love for Ephraim.
- 1> 31:20 H:A/B"N YAQ.IYR L/IY)EP:RAYIM
- 2>)IM YELED \$A(:A\$U(IYM
- b> evidence: coordinate p:
- 1> temporal p: the Lord still remembers him
- a: time: K.IY-MI/D."Y DAB.:RIY B./OW
- b: text: ZFKOR)EZ:K.:R/EN.W. (OWD
- 2> coordinate p: the Lord's bowels are moved over him
- a: (AL-K."N HFMW. M"(/AY L/OW
- b: RAX"M):ARAX:AM/EN.W. N:)UM-Y:HWFH S
- b) 21-22, abstraction: motivated command: The Lord summons the exiled nation to return. Note the shift from masculine for Ephraim to feminine verb forms. The entire nation, "virgin of Israel," consisting of the two parts whose descriptions flank her, is to return.
- 1) command: summary p
- a> text:
- 1> 31:21 HAC.IYBIY L/FK: CIY.UNIYM
- 2> &IMIY L/FK: T.AM:RW.RIYM
- 3> \$ITIIY LIB./"K: LA/M:SIL.FH
- 4> D.EREK: {HFLFK:T.IY} [HFLFK:T.:]
- 5> \$W.BIY B.:TW.LAT YI&:RF)"L
- 6> \$UBIY)EL-(FRAY/IK:)"L.EH
- b> summary: 31:22 (AD-MFTAY T.IT:XAM.FQIYN HA/B.AT HA/\$.OWB"BFH (rhetorical question, for command)
- 2) motive:
- a> K.IY-BFRF) Y:HWFH X:ADF\$FH B.F/)FREC
- b> N:Q"BFH T.:SOWB"B G.FBER S
- c) 31:23-25, text2: quote p, restoration of Judah (note extended quote formula). Full focus on the south.
- 1) quote f: 31:23 K.OH-)FMAR Y:HWFH C:BF)OWT):ELOH"Y YI&:RF)"L
- 2) quote: reason p
- a> text: sequence p
- 1> quote p
- a: quote f: (OWD YO)M:RW.)ET-HA/D.FBFR HA/Z.EH B.:/)EREC Y:HW.DFH W./B:/(FRFY/W B.:/\$W.BIY)ET-\$:BW.T/FM
- b: quote: Y:BFREK/:KF Y:HWFH N:W"H-CEDEQ HAR HA/Q.ODE\$
- 2> 31:24 W:/YF\$:BW. B/FH. Y:HW.DFH W:/KFL-(FRFY/W YAX:D.FW)IK.FRIYM W:/NFS:(W. B.A/("DER
- b> reason: 31:25 K.IY
- 1> HIR:W"YTIY NEPE\$ (:AY"PFH
- 2> W:/KFL-NEPE\$ D.F):ABFH MIL.)TIY