

Jacob's Last Years of Service and His Return to Canaan

Genesis 30:25-31:53

Jacob Serves Another Six Years for the Possession of Herds

When Joseph had been born, and the years of service in their work agreement had passed, Jacob wanted to leave Laban to return to Canaan with his family. Esau's anger would have cooled after such a long time. "Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go," he said to Laban, "for you know the service which I have given you." Jacob had had enough. Later we will hear how difficult his life had been.

Laban, however, wanted nothing to do with it, and he answered, almost imploringly, ". . . if I have found favour in thine eyes . . ." (KJV), a well-known expression, which we can supplement from the context with, ". . . stay with me!" Laban's reason was that he had divined that the LORD had blessed him for Jacob's sake. Jacob could freely choose whatever he wanted in return. Laban was very concerned for himself!

(The word "divined," in the original, means to use one or another sacred object for fortune-telling; Laban had the teraphim, a household god, for this [31:30], Joseph a silver cup [44:4b, 5].)

Jacob, in his reply, first of all admits that the LORD had indeed blessed Laban greatly, through Jacob's virtual enslavement—when Jacob came to work for Laban the herd had been small; since then it had increased abundantly—and accusingly he adds: "But now, when shall *I* provide for my *own* household also?" As for his further service, Jacob wanted *nothing* as a reward, meaning, as we see from the context, no one-time gift for the present, for Jacob was thinking of the future. This is what he wanted: every black sheep, and every speckled or spotted goat (meaning: both now and in the future).

For Laban this was a surprise, one with which he agreed immediately, for, in the Middle East, sheep as a rule are pure white, and goats are an even, dark colour. Jacob was, in fact, being very modest; he is shown to be a man of few pretensions. So it happened. The herds were sorted out, and Jacob's relatively few sheep and goats were set apart from the rest. So suspicious was Laban, however, that he sent this very small flock away under the care of his sons, while Jacob remained with Laban's flocks, a full three-days journey separating them. One could not be too sure . . . !

Things went differently than Laban had envisaged. During the mating season, Jacob took branches of green trees (by divine instruction, as we will see later), on which he had peeled white spots, and threw them into the watering troughs, so that the animals, seeing these while drinking, bore spotted young in due time. He also let white animals mate with the striped, speckled, and spotted in the flocks, to increase the probability of a successful result. This he only did when the stronger animals mated, and later, when the weaker animals came together, he left them for Laban. In this way his herds multiplied profusely, and as the years went by he could start buying slaves, camels, and asses, thus becoming a wealthy herding prince in his own right—a great mystery to Laban.

Jacob's Flight

His relationship with Laban did not improve over the years. Laban's sons accused Jacob of enriching himself at the expense of their father, and Laban's attitude was not at all favourable any longer. It would not take much to spark an open conflict. But then the LORD appeared to Jacob, commanding him to return to the land of his fathers and his kindred, and reassuring him with the promise that He would be with him.

Out in the field, where one could speak freely, Jacob informed Rachel and Leah of this. He complained that Laban, whom he had served with all his strength, had changed his wages ten times: now only the striped, then only the speckled, in conflict with their agreement. He also related his dream, in which he saw that the male goats which leaped on the flocks were striped, spotted, and mottled, and he heard the voice of the Angel calling his attention to it and saying, "I have seen all that Laban

is doing to you.” He was reminded of the promise he had made at Bethel and was commanded to return. We will return to this dream-revelation later. The expression “ten times” means many times, just as we sometimes say, “hundreds of times.”

Rachel and Leah were eager to go. “Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us”—a summary of the many complaints they uttered. “For this increased their indignation not a little, that this insatiable glutton had swallowed up the profit of this most disgraceful sale” (Calvin). They also emphasized that all the riches which God had taken away from Laban belonged to them and their children. For this reason they readily agreed to let Jacob act as he saw fit.

Making use of the fact that Laban and his men had gone a long way from home to shear his sheep and to take part in the festivities surrounding the shearing, while Jacob had remained with his own flocks, the baggage was packed, the herds were driven together, and Jacob fled with all that he had across the Euphrates as quickly as possible, and then with haste towards Canaan, the hill country of Gilead. Rachel stole her father’s teraphim and carried it along. An object of divination belonged to someone with authority.

Covenant Between Jacob and Laban

On the third day Laban was told of Jacob’s departure. He set out in pursuit, and after seven days he overtook Jacob in the hill country of Gilead. That being a distance of 600 km, the question is valid, how Jacob with all his flock was able to get that far in 10 days. We will have to assume that Laban first stayed at the shearing for quite some time. The work and the accompanying festivities had to be completed first. With his camels, which could travel a good 100 km, a day, he would still easily overtake Jacob.

That Laban was planning evil is apparent from the fact that God warned the Aramean in a dream that night not to speak either good or bad to Jacob. Still there was no lack of recriminations that morning: why such

a secretive flight? why no opportunity for a kiss of farewell? He also admitted that if God had not intervened, he could have done Jacob harm, for it was in his power. Then suddenly he asked, “You have gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house, but why did you steal my gods?”

To the question why he fled so secretly, Jacob replied that he was afraid that Laban would take his daughters away by force. As far as the gods were concerned, Laban could look for them, and whoever had stolen them would pay for it with his life. He did not know that Rachel had done it.

A thorough investigation of the tents did not turn up anything. Rachel had hidden the teraphim in her camel’s saddle and had sat down on it. As Laban was looking through her tent also, she had asked her father not to be angry that she could not rise, for “the way of women” was upon her. In this way Laban had to leave her tent also without finding the missing object, despite his very thorough search. A real women’s ruse.

But now it was Jacob’s turn to be angry. He accused Laban bitterly of being harsh and greedy. If the God of his fathers had not been with him, he would have been sent away empty-handed. God had seen it all, however, and had “rebuked [him] last night.”

Laban could find no word of defense, but his answer was haughty, saying in effect that all that Jacob had was really *his*, and grandly adding that he would not want to harm his children, and so would not exercise his rights.

Finally he suggested making a covenant. They agreed, sealing it with an oath, that Jacob would not harm Laban’s daughters by taking other wives, and that neither of the parties would come past the pile of stones they had erected with intent of harm, and which now also became a boundary-marker. After once again swearing to the stipulations of the covenant, Jacob offered a sacrifice and prepared a meal, after which, in the early morning, Laban, having kissed his daughters and grandchildren, departed.

Jacob's Dream

There are clearly two parts: *a.* Genesis 31:10-12; and *b.* Genesis 31:13. The *first* part concerns the striped, spotted, and mottled animals. From this must follow that that dream must be placed at the very *beginning*, for Laban changed the agreement so often, now the spotted, and then the striped going to Jacob. The *second* part contains the command to depart. Obviously this took place near the *end* of his stay with Laban (compare 31:3). Jacob related those two parts as one.

Was this two-part dream an invention, a lie? Some have claimed that this is the case. Jacob acted fraudulently. Calvin rejects this thought; correctly, in my opinion. There is not a single indication in Scripture that Jacob lied. Scripture gives a very different picture of Jacob. He constantly strived for the Messianic blessing, from the time of his birth. Let us not forget that the well-known interpretation of his name came, not from the author of the Bible book, but from Esau.

Jacob, the Blessed One and the Oppressed One

Now, being able to overview the whole story, with the help of this and the previous outline, we can see that Haran was not only the *birthplace* of the twelve patriarchs, from which the Old Testament church, Israel, sprang forth, but also the *place of serious oppression* (compare 15:13). This line of oppression runs from Ishmael, via Isaac's and Jacob's troubles, especially in Haran, to the land of the Pharaohs. Thus we see Jacob, the blessed one, in both the light of 15:13 and the light of his fatherhood in the history of salvation.

Questions

1. Why would Laban not have reckoned his son-in-law as one of his heirs?
2. Was it greed that made Jacob long for many possessions? Or did it have something to do with his role in the history of salvation?
3. (31:11) Was the Angel an ordinary angel? Give proof.
4. (31:15) What is meant by "the money given for us"?

5. Are Jacob's wives correct in saying that all that Jacob had gained was really theirs?
6. What is the significance of the theft of the teraphim by Rachel?
7. (31:24) What does it mean that Laban was not to speak good to Jacob?
8. (31:24) Why is Laban called an Aramean here although the reader knows this already from the previous chapters?
9. What is your opinion about Jacob's dream?
10. What indicates that neither Laban nor Jacob knew of the tricks with the animals beforehand?
11. May we classify Jacob's actions as sin?
12. What did the oppression consist of, in Haran as well as in Egypt?
13. Was there any provocation for this oppression?