

Comments on Genesis 31

¹And he heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, Jacob hath taken away all that was our father's; and of that which was our father's hath he gotten all this glory. ²And Jacob beheld the countenance of Laban, and, behold, it was not toward him as before. ³And the LORD said unto Jacob, Return unto the land of thy fathers, and to thy kindred; and I will be with thee.

v1-3 Laban's sons complain about the deal Laban made with Jacob and how it is turning to Jacob's favor and not Laban's (v. 1). Jacob sees that the son's complaining has changed Laban's relationship with him, and things are no longer amicable (v. 2). The Lord tells Jacob it is time for him to leave Laban and return to his family and He will watch over him (v. 3).

Jacob's previous attempt to leave in 30:25-27 was delayed by Laban's negotiating for fair terms of payment. However, Laban's sons, who stand to inherit Laban's estate, are now unhappy with the terms, seeing that Jacob is benefiting more than they are. Jacob sees things are no longer good between himself and Laban, because of Laban's sons, and the Lord has told him it is safe for him to return home, so Jacob decides it is time to leave.

v1 The first we hear of Laban having sons is in 30:35, where they are watching his sheep, separately from Jacob. It is safe to assume Laban's sons are significantly younger than his daughters, as if they were older then Rachel wouldn't have been tending sheep alone.

v2 This is the point where things between Jacob and Laban turn ugly. Previous to this, Laban's face was inclined towards Jacob, but now it is not. Why the change? Laban's sons in the preceding verse. With their inheritance in jeopardy, they are trying to maximize their gain, so they go after their father.

v3 "I will be with thee", reiterating the original promise from 29:15. The difference here is that original promise was twenty years earlier and was Jacob's first covenant with the Lord, and, therefore, had nothing to back it up but the Lord's word and Jacob's willingness to exercise faith. However, now, some twenty years later, Jacob has seen firsthand how the Lord has blessed him repeatedly.

⁴ And Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to the field unto his flock, ⁵ And said unto them, I see your father's countenance, that it is not toward me as before; but the God of my father hath been with me. ⁶ And ye know that with all my power I have served your father. ⁷ And your father hath deceived me, and changed my wages ten times; but God suffered him not to hurt me. ⁸ If he said thus, The speckled shall be thy wages; then all the cattle bare speckled: and if he said thus, The ringstraked shall be thy hire; then bare all the cattle ringstraked.

⁹ Thus God hath taken away the cattle of your father, and given them to me. ¹⁰ And it came to pass at the time that the cattle conceived, that I lifted up mine eyes, and saw in a dream, and, behold, the rams which leaped upon the cattle were ringstraked, speckled, and grisled. ¹¹ And the angel of God spake unto me in a dream, saying, Jacob: And I said, Here am I. ¹² And he said, Lift up now thine eyes, and see, all the rams which leap upon the cattle are ringstraked, speckled, and grisled: for I have seen all that Laban doeth unto thee. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred.

¹⁴ And Rachel and Leah answered and said unto him, Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house?

¹⁵ Are we not counted of him strangers? for he hath sold us, and hath quite devoured also our money. ¹⁶ For all the riches which God hath taken from our father, that is ours, and our children's: now then, whatsoever God hath said unto thee, do.

v4-16 Jacob brings his two wives, the daughters of Laban, away from Laban's house out into the field where they can talk privately, away from family and servants who might overhear or pressure the daughters (v. 4). Jacob tells them their father Laban is no longer favorably disposed towards him, but the Lord is (v. 5). Laban has been changing the terms of their agreement (v. 6-8, cf. 30:31-35), so the Lord has been protecting him and making the sheep produce according to whatever Laban has changed the terms to (v. 9-12), because of the covenant with Him (v. 13, cf. 28:18-22). Leah and Rachel are united with Jacob in because they are daughters, not sons (v. 14), and the bride price was Jacob's fourteen years of labor, so there is no financial claim on Laban, so they are no different than strangers (v. 15). All of Jacob's earnings are their wealth and their children's wealth, so they are all in on leaving, according to the what the Lord has told Jacob (v. 16).

This is Jacob talking to Leah and Rachel privately to find out if they are ready to leave their lifelong home and their

father and brothers. They clearly are ready to leave. This makes it clear Laban's accusation in v. 27 is false.

Curiously, there is no reference to their mother anywhere in the text. Perhaps their mother has passed away and there is no mother present, or perhaps their mother passed away and Laban remarried and the mother of their brothers is not their mother.

v7 The text indicates Laban kept changing the type of sheep Jacob could have from his flock. It doesn't say Laban withheld the sheep from him. It appears Laban saw Jacob's selective breeding program was entirely too effective at producing lambs of the previously agreed upon type, so he kept changing what type of sheep he could have, on the assumption that doing so would reduce the percentage of lambs going to Jacob. But, it didn't work. Whatever type of sheep Laban said Jacob could have, that ended up being the majority of lambs produced, so the Lord thwarted Laban to Jacob's benefit.

v10-11 Jacob attributes his livestock management techniques to the Lord, given to Jacob by a dream from Him.

v10 "rams which leaped upon the cattle", i.e., the male sheep mated with the female sheep.

v14 Leah and Rachel are not being cynical or bitter here, they are stating as a matter of fact that it is their brothers who inherit from their father, and not them. Because of the rites or marriage, their and their children's inheritance comes through their husband Jacob, not their father Laban. Compare 2 Sam. 30:1, 1 Ki. 12:16.

¹⁷ Then Jacob rose up, and set his sons and his wives upon camels; ¹⁸ And he carried away all his cattle, and all his goods which he had gotten, the cattle of his getting, which he had gotten in Padanaram, for to go to Isaac his father in the land of Canaan. ¹⁹ And Laban went to shear his sheep: and Rachel had stolen the images that were her father's. ²⁰ And Jacob stole away unawares to Laban the Syrian, in that he told him not that he fled. ²¹ So he fled with all that he had; and he rose up, and passed over the river, and set his face toward the mount Gilead.

v17-21 After having receive the consent of his wives (v. 4-14), Jacob packs up all of his family (v. 17), things and flocks (v. 18a-d) and leaves for his ancestral home (v. 18e, 21) without telling his father-in-law (v. 20), who was three days travel

away, busy sheering sheep (v. 19a). Unknown to Jacob, his wife Rachel stole her father's terafim (v. 19b).

²² And it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob was fled.

²³ And he took his brethren with him, and pursued after him seven days' journey; and they overtook him in the mount Gilead. ²⁴ And God came to Laban the Syrian in a dream by night, and said unto him, Take heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad. ²⁵ Then Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the mount: and Laban with his brethren pitched in the mount of Gilead.

²⁶ And Laban said to Jacob, what hast thou done, that thou hast stolen away unawares to me, and carried away my daughters, as captives taken with the sword? ²⁷ wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp? ²⁸ And hast not suffered me to kiss my sons and my daughters? thou hast now done foolishly in so doing. ²⁹ It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt: but the God of your father spake unto me yesternight, saying, Take thou heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad. ³⁰ And now, though thou wouldest needs be gone, because thou sore longedst after thy father's house, yet wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?

³¹ And Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid: for I said, Peradventure thou wouldest take by force thy daughters from me. ³² with whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live: before our brethren discern thou what is thine with me, and take it to thee. For Jacob knew not that Rachel had stolen them.

³³ And Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the two maidservants' tents; but he found them not. Then went he out of Leah's tent, and entered into Rachel's tent. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the images, and put them in the camel's furniture, and sat upon them. And Laban searched all the tent, but found them not. ³⁵ And she said to her father, Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me. And he searched but found not the images.

v22-35 Three days after they depart, because he is three days away sheering sheep (cf. 30:36), Laban is informed Jacob and his family have left (v. 22). Laban pursues Jacob and catches up with him seven days later (v. 23). The night before they meet, the Lord warns Laban via dream that he is not to hassle Jacob (v. 24-25).

When they meet, Laban faults Jacob for the way he left, because it deprived him of the opportunity to throw them a

farewell feast where he could say goodbye to them appropriately (v. 26-28). Laban warns Jacob the way he left makes him vulnerable to Laban, but the Lord warned Laban off from that (v. 29). But, regardless of wanting to leave and go to his father's house, that does not entitle Jacob to steal Laban's terafim (v. 30).

Jacob explains that he left the way he did because he feared Laban would try to prevent his daughters from leaving, by force if necessary (v. 31). But, he states he did not steal the terafim, and whoever did will die, not knowing it was Rachel (v. 21).

Laban searches all of the tents, and does not find them (v. 233-34, because Rachel protects herself by deceit (v. 35).

From a theological point of view, this passage is meant to show that when Jacob acts correctly, then there is no just accusation against him by Laban. His entire time there he was shorted by Laban, but never acted badly because of it. Jacob was justified, because his behavior was above reproach. So, when Rachel steals the household idols, nobody knows who it was, but Jacob is in the clear because he didn't do what he is being accused of. If Jacob had committed any infraction at any time, then Laban would have used that against him, but Laban had nothing on Jacob. That is the message: "If you are upright then nobody can fault you justifiably."

The idols figure into the story because these are the only things that were actually stolen, and not anything else. Any accusation of Jacob stealing anything else like daughters and grandchildren and sheep are all false accusations with no merit. The only accusation with merit is the stolen idols.

Whether Laban figured out that Rachel stole the idols or not is irrelevant, as Jacob is vindicated after a false accusation. The issue is Jacob's lack of guilt.

v24 "speak not to Jacob either good or bad", the "either good or bad" is a merism, a figure of speech meant to be all inclusive. The Lord is telling Laban to say nothing at all to Jacob. Clearly, Laban is not doing what the Lord told him to. But, it does end up having a mitigating effect on his behavior, per v. 42.

v26 "carried away my daughters, as captives taken with the sword", Laban is accusing Jacob of using force and threats of

violence to kidnap his daughters. This is the false accusation used to justify his threat of harm, cf. v. 29.

v28 Laban is referring to his grandchildren here.

v30 "stolen my gods", Laban refers to them here as "elohim" and Jacob parrots him in v. 31, but the text refers to them as "terafim" in v. 34-35, meaning idols. The intent is to disparage Laban and the worthless objects he considers to be legitimate representations of his gods.

Rachel likely stole the idols to prevent Laban from engaging in divination against Jacob, cf. 30:27. Most commentators focus on the potential value of the idols, but there is nothing in the story to suggest they are valuable, other than Laban wants them. But, why does he want them? The only thing in the story that suggest their value to Laban is his practice of divination.

Ephraim A. Spieser (Anchor Bible Commentary on Genesis, 1964, pages 250-251) suggests there is a connection between possession of household idols and estate ownership rights in relevant ancient documents, which would be supported by Rachel and Leah's statement in v. 14-15.

However, Jacob Sarna (Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis, 1989, page 216) while acknowledging this possibility discounts it because Jacob's family is leaving Mesopotamia permanently and are making no claim to Laban's estate. Rather, Sarna states the terafim were probably associated with Laban's divination and Rachel's depriving him of them was to prevent his ability to use them to divine Jacob's escape and whereabouts.

Assuming this is the case, Rachel's attempt to prevent pursuit became Laban's excuse for it, and a threat to her own life by her unwitting husband's oath.

v34-35 The text leaves it ambiguous as to whether Laban discerned the idols were under where Rachel was sitting. Was he genuinely nonplussed and therefore duped by her? Or, did he realize the only place he didn't look was under where she was sitting, and therefore it was her that stole the terafim, and was under the threat of death by Jacob's oath. If he realized this and let it pass, then he didn't want any harm to come to his daughter because of it, and he knew Jacob was not guilty of the theft. Laban's lack of apology for a baseless accusation might suggest he recognized the terafim were hidden underneath Rachel.

v34 "sat upon them", Rachel was attempting to hide them, but in doing so, she also insulted and desecrated them. If she were actually menstruating, this might have rendered them worthless in Laban's eyes, thus rendering them worthless, possibly mitigating the lethal threat.

³⁶ And Jacob was wroth, and chode with Laban: and Jacob answered and said to Laban, what is my trespass? what is my sin, that thou hast so hotly pursued after me? ³⁷ whereas thou hast searched all my stuff, what hast thou found of all thy household stuff? set it here before my brethren and thy brethren, that they may judge betwixt us both.

³⁸ This twenty years have I been with thee; thy ewes and thy she goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. ³⁹ That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee; I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. ⁴⁰ Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes. ⁴¹ Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times.

⁴² Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hath seen mine affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked thee yesternight.

v36-42 Jacob is no longer subject to the rules of Laban's house, so he states his case against him, in front of his family and Laban's family, among who are probably armed men (cf. v. 29). Jacob states flatly the accusation of theft against him was wrong, and proves that by telling him to produce the evidence of theft, which he cannot (v. 36-37). He then states his case against Laban in the case of the labor provided him for twenty years, wherein his behavior was above reproach (v. 38-41). He concludes the presentation of his side of the case by stating that had not God intervened on his behalf against Laban, then Laban certainly would have taken everything from Jacob and sent him home empty handed (v. 42).

Jacob's case against Laban shows the importance of keeping your behavior above reproach, even when being mistreated. When one behaves badly, using the bad behavior of others as an excuse, it is just false justification, and both parties are condemned. The only way to deal with people like Laban is to do the right thing, even when being wronged. At this point, Laban has no rejoinder for Jacob.

Also note Jacob's impassioned defense is meant to persuade any potential attackers their cause is unjust and the accusations are false, so they will be unwilling to follow through on the attack.

v42 "the fear of Isaac", the meaning of this passage is obscure, there is no consensus among commentators as to what is being referenced here. It might mean "the One whom Isaac Fears" or "Isaac's God causes Fear". If it is the latter, then perhaps it is a reference to the events of ch. 26.

⁴³ And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that thou seest is mine: and what can I do this day unto these my daughters, or unto their children which they have born?

⁴⁴ Now therefore come thou, let us make a covenant, I and thou; and let it be for a witness between me and thee. ⁴⁵ And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar. ⁴⁶ And Jacob said unto his brethren, Gather stones; and they took stones, and made an heap: and they did eat there upon the heap. ⁴⁷ And Laban called it Jegarsahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. ⁴⁸ And Laban said, This heap is a witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Galeed; ⁴⁹ And Mizpah; for he said, The LORD watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another. ⁵⁰ If thou shalt afflict my daughters, or if thou shalt take other wives beside my daughters, no man is with us; see, God is witness betwixt me and thee. ⁵¹ And Laban said to Jacob, Behold this heap, and behold this pillar, which I have cast betwixt me and thee: ⁵² This heap be witness, and this pillar be witness, that I will not pass over this heap to thee, and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and this pillar unto me, for harm. ⁵³ The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge betwixt us. And Jacob sware by the fear of his father Isaac.

⁵⁴ Then Jacob offered sacrifice upon the mount, and called his brethren to eat bread: and they did eat bread, and tarried all night in the mount. ⁵⁵ And early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his sons and his daughters, and blessed them: and Laban departed, and returned unto his place.

v43-55 Laban states these are his daughters, and his grandchildren, and flocks, but he admits there is nothing he can do about them leaving him (v. 43). Laban proposes a contract between themselves (v. 44). They stack stones as a symbol of the covenant and eat together (v. 45-49). Laban commits Jacob to treat his daughters well and not take any more women to wife (v. 50). They also commit to each other to not cross past the

pillars they've made for any hostile purpose (v. 51-53). Jacob prepares a sacrificial meal and the feast runs well into the night (v. 54). In the morning, they say their final farewells and Laban leaves to go back home (v. 55).

v44-45 The covenant and stacking of stones is something both groups would have observed and witnessed as a public act engaged in by both parties. Laban brought his party out in hostility to Jacob, and they are now witnessing the formal cessation of hostilities and peaceful permanent separation of the two groups.

v54 Where Laban feigned desire to throw a feast for his departing family (cf. v. 27), Jacob actually does. But, he turns it into a religious act where he is sacrificing to his God, implicitly giving thanks to Him for being spared Laban's wrath. And Laban is forced to participate.

There is also some irony in Jacob showing respect to Laban's father's gods in v. 53 when they formalize their covenant. But, here, Jacob surely only sacrificed to the Lord.

v55 Laban gets to follow through on what he accused Jacob of depriving him of in v. 28, again proving Jacob was in the right and Laban was in the wrong.

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