

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 28

Chapter 31

Laban's Sons Complain

Genesis 31:1 Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth." ² And Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not *friendly* toward him as formerly.

When the sons of Laban saw that Jacob had separated the herds, it was clear to them that he was considering all the blemished flocks that had been born in the last six months as his own property. However, the sons of Laban still believed those offspring belong to their father. It seems that they were bothered because of the sheer magnitude of the wealth that had been transferred to Jacob. Under Jacob's agreement with Laban all the blemished animals would be his. Laban changed that agreement by removing all the blemished animals and moving them three day's journey away. He then put Jacob in charge of all the unblemished animals. That action was clearly Laban's plan to thwart the agreement with Jacob and force him to remain in Haran, Padan-aram. However, the LORD intervened and caused all the unblemished animals to bear blemished offspring. In addition, because each female unblemished sheep and goat gave birth to twin lambs and kids, the herd tripled in size with two-thirds of the flock being blemished in the six month season; therefore, all the newborn blemished flock belonged to Jacob in accordance with his agreement with Laban. Jacob was wealthier than Laban at this point in the story and Laban and his sons were sincerely disturbed. Their attitudes changed and Jacob recognized the difference.

Lord's Instruction to Jacob

Genesis 31:3 Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."

Jacob might have doubted his resolve to leave Laban after the conflict over the separation of the herds had it not been for this encounter with the LORD. The instruction given to Jacob by his father twenty years before had been fulfilled and the LORD honored Isaac's desire. Jacob had a family and he had the wealth to provide for all the souls in his care. Upon his return to Isaac's home, Jacob would not be a burden on Isaac's resources. In reality, Jacob was wealthy enough that he did not need to inherit Esau's birthright that he had purchased for a bowl of sod pottage. In this passage, the LORD gave His approval and instructed Jacob to return to Isaac's home. In doing so, the LORD promised that He would be with Jacob.

Jacob's Family Meeting

Genesis 31:4 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, ⁵ and said to them, "I see your father's attitude, that it is not *friendly* toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶ "And you know that I have served your father with all my strength. ⁷ "Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. ⁸ "If he spoke thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped. ⁹ "Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given *them* to me. ¹⁰ "And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating *were* striped, speckled, and mottled. ¹¹ "Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' ¹² "And he said, 'Lift up, now, your eyes and see *that* all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³ 'I am the God *of* Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.'"

In this family meeting, Jacob expressed his remembrance of Laban's treatment of him. He also mentioned the final agreement for the blemished animals in order for the family to understand why Jacob had personally taken possession of the offspring of Laban's herd. In verses 9-12, the angel of God explained that it was God's plan; it was God's will that the unblemished bore the blemished in order to make Jacob a wealthy man with sheep and goats. Here, too, Moses revealed a little more of what the LORD said to Jacob besides what was recorded in verse 3, **"I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth."** The LORD had not forgotten the promise He made to Jacob in the stairway dream at Bethel. He had blessed Jacob at every point for twenty years; Jacob was no longer the deceiving 71 year old brother of Esau. He was now a 91 year old man of honor, a man worthy of the LORD's blessing, a man ready to return home to face the old family in Isaac's home. What would Isaac say to him? What would Rebekah say? What would Esau say? Those answers will unfold in future chapters.

Rachel and Leah's Concern

Genesis 31:14 And Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father's house? ¹⁵ "Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. ¹⁶ "Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you."

For the first time in the Scripture we read the testimony of Rachel and Leah about the attitude and temperament of their father, Laban. The sisters blamed him for the circumstances of their

marriage arrangement with Jacob. Evidently, Leah was forced to go into the marriage chamber knowing that the bed rightfully belonged to Rachel. They both felt that their father considered them property and because of the way Laban handled Jacob, the sisters were sold but not truly delivered to be the sole property of Jacob. Laban held on to them and controlled them even when their husband should have had total say. **"Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price,"** was the sisters way of saying they did not trust their father and nothing remained in his home that would cause them to stay in Haran. Even with all the struggle of their 13 year marriage to Jacob, they trusted him wholeheartedly and wanted to be with him away from their father.

Jacob's Plan

Genesis 31:17 Then Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; ¹⁸ and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac.

It was time to make the 660 mile journey back toward Beersheba and the home of Isaac. Jacob's family and property were huge. He had brought on numerous male and female servants to help with the herds, he had 12 children, two wives and their two maids, and, of course, he had the animals. Needless to say, Jacob had to provide transportation for his family and, most, likely he acquired the camels through a barter or sale of sheep and goats.

Rachel's Theft

Genesis 31:19 When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's.



Map 25: Haran to Mts. of Gilead

We must remember that Laban had sent all the blemished flocks that he had originally separated from his herd with his sons a three days journey away from Jacob. It was time to shear those sheep and Laban went to where the herds were being pastured to do so. During his absence, Jacob and his family packed their belongings and left Haran, Paddan-aram. In the packing process, Rachel stole the idols of Laban. The Hebrew word for them is *teraphim* for which we have no absolute description or meaning. Many writers have attempted to describe these idols but no one knows exactly what they looked like. Nevertheless, later in this chapter we will discover that Laban had noticed the disappearance of these idols from his home. We might pause to wonder why Rachel stole the idols. Did she worship before them? Did she consider them valuable and something she could sell along the way to Canaan? Did she take them because she knew they were special to her father and their disappearance would hurt him deeply? We do not know.

Journey Toward Gilead

Genesis 31:20 And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he was fleeing.²¹ So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the *Euphrates* River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

Notice that Jacob crossed the River and “set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.” Two issues arise in this passage. First, how did Jacob move his family and all his herds across the great River Euphrates? Even this far northeast of its delta, the Euphrates would have been difficult to traverse, especially at shearing time. Second, from Haran to the Mountains of Gilead was 540 miles away. When moving with a family and livestock, the normal travel time from Haran to the Gilead area took about 27 days.

Laban's Pursuit

Genesis 31:22 When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled,²³ then he took his kinsmen with him, and pursued him *a distance of seven days' journey*; and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead.

From the time the sons complained about Jacob taking the flock and Jacob's departure with the family, it took three day's for word to reach Laban. In this passage we find a difficulty in reconciling the distance and time of travel for both Jacob and Laban.

Jacob had left Haran and traveled three days before Laban heard the news. Jacob continued for another seven day in the direction of the Mountains of Gilead while Laban was in hot pursuit. Therefore, ten days out of Haran, Laban caught up with Jacob in the hill country of Gilead. The troubling word in this passage is “overtook.” It actually means “came close.” Laban did not interact with Jacob that day, he was just in the same vicinity as the caravan of Jacob. In other words, Laban must have followed Jacob's caravan for another 20 days before he and his family camped near enough for Jacob to know he was there. After arriving at Gilead, Laban would enter Jacob's camp the next morning.

Laban's Encounter with God

Genesis 31:24 And God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night, and said to him, " Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad."

Evidently, the night before Laban intended to approach Jacob, the LORD came to him in a dream with the warning.

Laban and Jacob in Gilead

Genesis 31:25 And Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead.

The Hebrew word for “caught up” actually means “to reach.” When Laban finally reached Jacob, both families had pitched their tents in the hill country of Gilead.

Laban’s Complaint

Genesis 31:26 Then Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷ "Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; ²⁸ and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. ²⁹ "It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ' Be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob.' ³⁰ "And now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; *but* why did you steal my gods?"

Laban’s complaint to Jacob could have caused any number of results from good to evil. He accused Jacob of taking his daughters prisoners and sneaking out of town, failing to give Laban the opportunity to send his daughters off with a grand blessing and musical reception. But then he quickly admitted that God had spoken to him the night before with the warning. Laban knew the whole story, he knew of his misdeeds with Jacob, he knew his daughters and their children belonged to Jacob, he knew the blemished herds belonged to Jacob. Therefore, Laban finally made the one justifiable complaint that he had against Jacob, “**why did you steal my gods?**”

Jacob’s Answer to Laban

Genesis 31:31 Then Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I said, 'Lest you would take your daughters from me by force.' ³² "The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take *it* for yourself." For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

Jacob knew nothing about the stolen idols. He was afraid that if he had let Laban know of his departure, Laban would have demanded that the daughters, maids and children stay in Haran. In that setting in Haran, Leah and Rachel would have probably obeyed their father instead of their husband. As for the theft of the idols, Jacob was willing to put the thief to death immediately. Jacob even gave Laban permission to search for the idols.

Laban’s Search

Genesis 31:33 So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find *them*. Then he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's tent. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel's saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent, but did not find *them*.

Had Laban begun his search in Rachel's tent, the outcome of this event might have been different. But Laban began in Jacob's tent and then moved to the tents of Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah in that order. Rachel's tent was last and she had time to hide the idols while he was searching the other tents. She put them in the camel saddle stored in her tent and she was sitting on the saddle when Laban entered and searched her tent unsuccessfully for the idols.

Rachel's Interaction with Her Father

Genesis 31:35 **And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me." So he searched, but did not find the household idols.**

Rachel did not stand before her father because she wanted to hide the idols beneath her dress. She used the excuse that she was in "the manner of women." Rachel's manner was not a pregnancy; pregnant women could be touched. Rachel used the excuse that she was in her regular monthly cycle and therefore she was unclean and even a husband or father was not to touch a woman in that condition. The excuse worked. The excuse was a lie and she was the thief.

Jacob Contends with Laban

Genesis 31:36 **Then Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob answered and said to Laban, "What is my transgression? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? ³⁷ "Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set *it* here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. ³⁸ "These twenty years I *have been* with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. ³⁹ "That which was torn *of beasts* I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand *whether* stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰ "Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. ⁴¹ "These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. ⁴² "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night."**

Once Laban was unsuccessful with his search, Jacob felt vindicated and he became angry with Laban because of his allegation. Laban found nothing that belonged to him. Furthermore, probably for the first time, Jacob complained to Laban about his mistreatment over the past 20 years and yet the LORD blessed Laban because of his presence in the family. Jacob then

expressed to Laban that had the LORD not intervened with Laban in a dream the night before, Laban would have taken his daughter, grandchildren, maids and herds and left Jacob with nothing. But the LORD did intervene and Laban was the one judged in the dream, not Jacob.

Covenant of Laban and Jacob

Genesis 31:43 Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?" ⁴⁴ "So now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me." ⁴⁵ Then Jacob took a stone and set it up *as a pillar*. ⁴⁶ And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷ Now Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.

Laban agreed that he actually owned everything Jacob had in the caravan, but he had no power to take them because of the LORD's warning. Instead of stripping Jacob of everything, Laban offered to make a covenant with a meal. The place would be called Shadutha in Laban's language "but Jacob called it Galeed" in his. Both names mean "round heap."

Laban's Instruction to Jacob

Genesis 31:48 And Laban said, " This heap is a witness between you and me this day." Therefore it was named Galeed; ⁴⁹ and Mizpah, for he said, "May the LORD watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. ⁵⁰ "If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, *although* no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me." ⁵¹ And Laban said to Jacob, "Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. ⁵² "This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. ^{53a} " The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us."

An extra name is added in verse 48. Mizpah means "watch tower." In other words, this round heap of an altar that Jacob and Laban made would serve as a reminder that Jacob promised that he would never mistreat Leah or Rachel and that he would never take another wife. Furthermore, the round heap of stones stood as a promise that Laban would never journey south of the altar to harm Jacob and in return, Jacob would never journey north of the altar to harm Laban. If any harm came to either of the men or their families, it would be done by the "God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father," Terah. This passage does not mean that Nahor and Terah worshiped the same God as Abraham. In Joshua 24:2 we read about Terah and Nahor, "And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, from ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, *namely*, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of

Nahor, and they served other gods.’” In his statement, Laban recognized that the God of Jacob was strong and mighty and had blessed him because Jacob was in his presence but he was not willing to discount the gods of his father and grandfather. He was covering all his bases by invoking Abraham’s true God and the imaginary gods of Nahor and Terah. Laban implied that Jacob may have had a powerful God helping him, but he was still a deceitful and ungodly person.

Jacob’s Agreement

Genesis 31: 53b So Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac. ⁵⁴ Then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain.

Jacob did not take the bait to swear before the false gods; rather, he “swore by the fear of his father Isaac.” Jacob had seen his father worship the true God who had aided him for the past twenty years. Jacob was not going to mix his father’s God in with those of Laban. He would worship God in the same manner as his father and that he did with a sacrifice and a meal. Jacob invited Laban to his time of worship, sacrifice and fellowship, but not under Laban’s terms.

Laban’s Departure

Genesis 31: 55 And early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place.

The following morning, Laban said goodbye to his family and returned to Haran. Jacob would continue south toward Beersheba.

In the timeline of events thus far we can safely say that it was 2,242 years after the creation of Adam. Jacob was 91 years old, Rueben was no more than 13 years old, and Joseph was one year old. We know their birth order but not the ages of the 10 children between Rueben and Joseph. With Joseph’s age, we will be able to determine the year when the bondage in Egypt began for Jacob’s family.

