

GENESIS

In the beginning God...

Jacob and Laban – Part 4

Jacob obeys God and begins his trek with his family back to Canaan. Jacob left what had become home for the last 20 years taking all of his belongings, servants and livestock all while Laban and his family were away shearing his sheep. Jacob had gone three days before Laban found out about Jacob's departure. Laban and his sons quickly gave chase and pursued them for a week before they caught up with them in the hill country of Gilead. However just before making contact with Jacob, God spoke to Laban in a dream and said, *"Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad."* (Genesis 31:24b ESV) or in other words *"I'm warning you—leave Jacob alone!"* (NLT)

Chapter 31

- V25** *And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead.* (ESV)
- V26** *And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword?"* (ESV)
- V27** *Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre?* (ESV)
- V28** *And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly.* (ESV)
- V29** *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 say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.'* (ESV)
- V30** *And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?"* (ESV)

The next day Laban catches up with Jacob in the hill country and I am sure it was a tense reunion. Laban of course probably really frustrated that he can't say or do what he probably wanted to say or do quickly accuses Jacob of trickery. Complaining that his surprise departure deprived him and his family from saying goodbye with a joyous celebration. His hypocritical speech probably didn't seem to surprise anyone. Laban, due to God's warning, was undoubtedly cautious in choosing the right words to say. He then resorts to calling Jacob's actions as being foolish.

Oddly Laban then boasts that he can do Jacob considerable harm. Most scholars believe that verse 29 is a statement that he wants to harm Jacob right then but he wont.

He then told of his dream, and of God's warning. Note that he refers to God as the God of Jacob's father and not as his God or simply God. Regardless how he calls God Laban was very much aware of His power and chose not to take the discussion any further as he abruptly changes the subject.

Trying to justify his actions to some degree, he told Jacob that he realized he wanted to return to his father's house for some time and that this was good enough reason to leave Haran. So why then did he steal his gods? (In verse 19 they are called teraphim, small figurine idols) Laban was now trying to excuse his rapid pursuit of Jacob on this ground. Laban undoubtedly knew Jacob well enough to know that Jacob, of all people, would never have taken his 'gods,' Jacob would have had nothing whatever to do with them, even if they really did represent the inheritance rights of their owner.

V31 *Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. (ESV)*

V32 *Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. (ESV)*

Before answering Laban's charge of theft of the teraphim, Jacob felt it important to tell Laban and everyone there why he had left suddenly and secretly. Jacob said that, if he had proposed departing openly, he was afraid that Laban would try to take his daughters and likely his children back from him by force.

As far as Laban's images were concerned, Jacob knew nothing of them, and was angry at being accused. If, by chance, someone in his employ had taken them, thus embarrassing him and giving Laban an excuse for chasing him, Laban could feel free to take them and carry out whatever penalty the law of the times would warrant. The Code of Hammurabi, an ancient but well-preserved Babylonian code of law from approximately 1700 BC, for example, cites that the theft of palace or temple gods as a crime punishable by death. Furthermore, if Laban found anything that really belonged to him, he was welcome to take it back.

V33 *So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. (ESV)*

V34 *Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. (ESV)*

V35 *And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." So he searched but did not find the household gods. (ESV)*

Laban proceeded to search the entire caravan. He most definitely searched Jacob's tent and then of course, thinking perhaps that Jacob might have hidden something in one of his wives' tents, he looked through their tents as well.

If not the gods, Laban was probably hoping he might be able to find something Jacob had stolen giving him a reason to complain to God that His protection of Jacob was unwarranted and perhaps to justify him in taking back some of his other possessions.

Rachel had hidden the images in her camel's saddlebag, which was now in her tent, having been placed there the previous night as they made camp. Rachel was sitting on the bag as Laban entered the tent. She excused herself for not rising by saying she was not feeling well (due to her menstrual period). This was probably a legitimate excuse, at the time, or Jacob himself might have suspected she was concealing something. Consequently, Laban found nothing in her tent either.

V36 Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?" (ESV)

V37 For 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. (ESV)

V38 These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. (ESV)

V39 What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. (ESV)

V40 There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. (ESV)

V41 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 have changed my wages ten times. (ESV)

V42 If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night." (ESV)

Jacob, still completely unsuspecting Rachel had Laban's gods, appears to have lost his temper at this point, protesting Laban's attitudes and actions, which he had tolerated in silence for so many years. He called for Laban, before all his kinsmen and servants, to state exactly what charges he wished to bring against Jacob that could justify such a hot pursuit to catch him before he could reach his own home with what was in every way rightfully his. Jacob challenged him to allow all his kinsmen to be the judge of such charges and to render a just verdict. Laban could only maintain an embarrassed silence as Jacob spoke.

Once he started Jacob could hardly restrain himself. He reminded Laban of his faithful service for 20 years, 14 of which had been simply for the privilege of marrying his daughters. He did not mention Laban's deception, probably for Leah's sake, which had

doubled the length of service in return for a wife he didn't want in the first place. Six years he had served him *"for your flock;"* that is, the cattle were not a price paid by Laban, but rather the result of God's blessings. Jacob had never even used any of Laban's animals for his own food while caring for them, which was considered the right of every shepherd. Also when wild animals were a danger to the flocks, Jacob had himself born the cost of any losses due to this cause.

Jacob concluded with a testimony that God had been with him, and that He had seen his diligent labor as well as the way in which Laban had dealt with him. Jacob's increasing prosperity had been due to the Lord's blessings, and now God had confirmed all this by warning Laban to not harm Jacob in a dream the night before.

V43 *Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne?"* (ESV)

V44 *Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me."* (ESV)

V45 *So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar.* (ESV)

V46 *And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones." And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap.* (ESV)

V47 *Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.* (ESV)

When Laban finally had an opportunity to reply to Jacob's outburst, he could not say anything at all by the way of denial. He tried to divert attention from Jacob's embarrassing facts by again changing the subject. How could Jacob suppose that he would do anything to hurt his daughters or his grandchildren? Further, all of Jacob's cattle had come from Laban's flocks; so why wasn't Jacob grateful that he had made a way for Jacob to acquire them? Though he realized he was in the wrong, he could not bring himself to repent or acknowledge his guilt. He instead proposed a covenant between himself and Jacob. A pillar was erected to commemorate the agreement. The pillar was named by Laban the "heap of testimony (or witness)" in the Aramaic language of his ancestors while Jacob called it the "heap of witness" in the Hebrew language.

V48 *Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he named it Galeed,* (ESV)

V49 *and Mizpah, for he said, "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight.* (ESV)

V50 *If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me."*(ESV)

V51 *Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me.* (ESV)

V52 *This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm.* (ESV)

V53 *The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac,* (ESV)

Laban took the initiative in proposing the terms of the covenant after the pillar was erected. Implying that Jacob was the one not to be trusted, he demanded certain restrictions on his activities. Knowing that each one of his demands were not a problem, knowing the character of Jacob and knowing what God would do if he were to pursue. Laban then called the heap of stones “Mizpah” meaning “watchtower,” denoting it as a sort of sentry guarding the boundary. Laban even invoked the name of God, saying, “*May the LORD keep watch between us to make sure that we keep this covenant when we are out of each other’s sight.*” (Verse 49b NLT) Implying that Jacob was the one who needed watching, and this was God’s responsibility. Jacob, rather than trying to clear up Laban’s confusion, he simply swore his oath “*by the Fear of his father Isaac.*” The covenant would be broken if either party crossed over the boundary. Nahor was Abraham’s brother (since Abraham’s family were known pagan worshipers verse 53 may actually be referring to two or more Gods the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor and possibly a different god of their father, Terah, see Joshua 24:2); however it is more likely they are simply all referring to the One True God.

V54 *and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.* (ESV)

V55 *Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.* (ESV)

Most of the day had been spent by now, so they prepared to pass another night in their respective camps in the mountains of Gilead. Jacob, in thanksgiving for God’s final deliverance from Laban, offered sacrifices that evening there on the mountain.

Laban then departed and went home to his own place. No further mention is made of him or his sons in the Bible. There is some speculation that Laban was Balaam’s grandfather, they are from the same area (See Numbers 23:7) plus the Babylonian Talmud identifies Laban with Beor, Balaam’s father.