

Genesis 31: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] Genesis chapter 31 Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth.
- And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favour as before. Then the Lord said to Jacob, Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.
- So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was, and said to them, I see that your father does not regard me with favour as he did before, but the God of my father has been with me.
- You know that I have served your father with all my strength, yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not permit him to harm me. If he said the spotted shall be your wages, then all the flock bore spotted, and if he said the stripes shall be your wages, then all the flock bore striped.
- Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes, and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled.
- [1 : 09] Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, Jacob, and I said, Here I am. And he said, Lift up your eyes and see. All the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you.
- I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land, and return to the land of your kindred. Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, 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 indeed devoured our money. All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children.
- Now then, whatever God has said to you, do. So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan Aram, to go to the land of Canaan, to his father Isaac.
- Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he intended to flee.
- [2 : 23] He fled with all that he had, and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days, and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead.
- But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night, and said to him, Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad. 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. And Laban said to Jacob, What have you done that you have tricked me, and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword?

Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I may have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? Now you have done foolishly. 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. And now you have gone away, because you longed greatly for your father's house.

[3 : 33] But why did you steal my guards? Jacob answered and said to Laban, Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. Anyone with whom you find your guards 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. 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. Now Rachel had taken the household guards, and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them.

Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. 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 guards. Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, What is my offence?

[4 : 36] What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? 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.

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. 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. There I was, by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes.

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. 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 labour of my hands, and rebuked you last night. 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.

[5 : 50] But what can I do this day for these my daughters, or for their children whom they have borne? Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me. So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, and Jacob said to his kinsmen, Gather stones.

And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. Laban called it Jigar se-Hajutha, but Jacob called it Galid. Laban said, This heap is a witness between you and me today.

Therefore he named it Galid, and Mishpah, for he said, The Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of one another's sight. 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.

Then Laban said to Jacob, See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me? 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.

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, and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country, and called his kinsmen to eat bread.

[7 : 09] They ate bread, and spent the night in the hill country. Early in the morning, Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed, and returned home.

In Genesis chapter 31, Jacob finally leaves the house of Laban. In the previous chapter, Jacob's family grew, and although Laban continued to mistreat him, he outwitted Laban at his own game.

God also heard the prayers of Leah and Rachel, and gave them children. Now Jacob recognizes that both Laban and his sons are not favorably inclined towards him. Jacob has been dispossessing them, even as they have been trying to cheat him.

Whatever Laban did to try to undermine Jacob, God caused Jacob to prosper against it. While the exact mechanism of Jacob's plan with the rods is much debated, whatever it was, it shows not just Jacob's cunning, but also God's providence.

It is God who ensures that Laban will not defeat Jacob, but that at each stage, Jacob will be blessed, even as Laban seeks to oppress him. In chapters 29 to 31, God's providence is also very much active in the hidden realms of conception and birth.

[8 : 23] This isn't a grand story of miracles and wonders and pyrotechnics that we might find in the story of the plagues, for instance. Rather, it's a story of God's providence in ensuring that Jacob's wives would be fruitful and that his flocks would be fruitful and that they would bear the right sort of offspring.

The changing attitude of Laban to Jacob is similar to the changing attitude of the Egyptians to Israel before the Exodus. And there are a great many Exodus themes in this chapter, themes that we'll examine in a moment.

Laban had further mistreated Jacob and his daughters by consuming the bride price that Jacob had paid for his daughters. This was supposed to be their security, something that he would hold in trust for them if they ever needed it.

If Jacob mistreated them, or if Jacob died and they needed some security, that money was theirs. But he consumed it for himself. Jacob's flight occurs at the time of sheep-sharing.

Now, this is a significant time, as we'll see as we go further in the story of Scripture, where there are various reminders of the events of this chapter. For instance, in the story of 1 Samuel chapter 25, David has a run-in with Nabal at the time of sheep-shearing.

[9 : 38] He protects Nabal's flocks, but yet Nabal treats him in an ungrateful and unfair manner. David then sets out to avenge himself against Nabal, going with 400 men to attack him, and then he's pacified by Abigail sending ahead a wave of gifts.

And that's what we see in chapter 32 and 33 of Genesis, as Jacob sends gifts ahead of himself to Esau. But Nabal should remind us of the character of Laban.

And sure enough, if you turn around the word Laban, in both Hebrew and English, you get the word Nabal. And there are connections between these characters in Scripture that help us to understand who different figures are.

It helps us to understand that David is a new Jacob, but that David can also be pulled at certain points towards the character of Esau. Now Jacob takes his property, crosses the river with the company of his family, livestock and possessions, and goes to the mountains.

It's an exodus pattern. And just as the exodus involved the humiliation of false gods, so Rachel humiliates the gods of Laban by stealing them. Again, just as in the exodus, the departing group is pursued by their former master and overtaken ultimately.

[10 : 52] Perhaps we're supposed to see further connections. Maybe the ten changes of wages mentioned earlier on in the chapter and then repeated later on, each of which were thwarted by God, is some parallel to the ten plagues.

I think that's less certain to me, but it's a possibility. Laban blames Jacob, as we often see in the accusations of the people of God in Genesis, it shouldn't be taken at face value.

Laban, for all his claims, would not have sent Jacob away kindly. God has to intervene to prevent Laban from acting in violence or coercion or some other way against Jacob.

Jacob had to steal away because he genuinely feared that Laban would take Rachel and Leah from him. And again, maybe we can note some parallels between the story of Sarai and Pharaoh or Sarah and Abimelech and the story of Rebecca and Abimelech in chapter 26.

Jacob declares a death sentence upon the person who stole Laban's teraphim, his household gods, not knowing that it was Rachel. Rachel took the teraphim, placed them in her camel's saddlebags and sat upon the camel's saddlebags, claiming that as she was menstruating at the time, she wouldn't get up for her father.

[12 : 06] Once again, this is one of those stories that has an aftermath to it. It plays out in various other stories in Genesis. There is the story of Rachel's death.

In chapter 37, there is the story of camels coming from Mount Gilead to take her oldest son away. And then finally, there is the story of the pursuit of Benjamin, where again, some means of divination has been stolen and there is a pursuit to obtain it.

There is a death sentence declared upon the person whose possession it is found. There is a searching of property from the oldest to the youngest, finding it in the possession of the youngest, who is the youngest son of Rachel.

And then the story proceeds from there. As I've noted on various occasions, as we see these sorts of connections, we will be helped greatly to read and understand what's taking place within the stories.

What were the teraphim? Well, they're household gods and some have suggested they were used for divination. They also may have been used to demonstrate property ownership and other things like that.

[13 : 17] So they would have a number of different purposes. The fact that they were taken here seems to have some connection with divination, but there might also be some statement about the true possession of Laban's wealth, that by taking the household gods, there's something like taking title deeds to a property.

There are themes of deception here as well, which are very important. In Genesis chapter three, the woman was deceived and outwitted by the serpent. But in scripture, there's poetic justice in the way that women routinely deceive and outwit tyrants.

So maybe think about the Hebrew midwives deceiving Pharaoh, or Rahab deceiving the men of Jericho, or Jael deceiving Sisera, or Michael deceiving Saul, or Esther deceiving Haman.

These stories are a reversal of the original deception. It's a way by which God is going to set things right. But there are other subtle overtones that we might hear though.

As in the story of Jacob deceiving his father Isaac, there was an appropriateness to him having the blessing. But yet that action and its consequences hung over the rest of his life.

[14 : 25] And had bitter consequences down the line. Here also, the actions of Rachel have a shadow that is cast over her life that follows. And we'll see some of that as we go through the story.

The woman has taken something that was not her own. And a death sentence hangs over her as a result. Much as in the story of Eve in Genesis. And when Jacob mentions the animals torn by wild beasts, we might have a further sense of premonition.

The time will come, not too long hence, when his own son, his son by Rachel, will be presented to him as if it were an animal torn by wild beasts. And so, even if Laban gets what's coming to him, the actions of Rachel have consequences.

Consequences that are very painful in what follows. A question to consider. Can you think about ways in which the characters of Saul, David and Michael in the book of 1 Samuel are like Laban, Jacob and Rachel in the book of Genesis?