

Genesis 29 Jacob in Haran

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Overview

This chapter has two episodes dealing with Jacob in Haran. The first describes his arrival (1-14), and the second the business dealings around getting a wife (15-30). It also begins a longer episode describing the birth of his sons (29:31-30:24), which is in fact the center of the Jacob chiasm.

The first two paragraphs fulfill his mother's instructions to "flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran; 44 And tarry with him a few days" (Gen 27:43-44), and his father's instructions to "go to Padanaram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother" (Gen 28:2). They have numerous similarities with the account of how Abraham's servant came to this same household 77 years before, but also numerous contrasts that highlight the point that Moses wishes to make.

1-14, Jacob Arrives in Haran

1, *The Journey*

The description of Jacob's journey emphasizes his impoverished condition and the threats to which he is exposed.

1 Then Jacob went on his journey.—Lit., "lifted up his feet," only here in the OT. The expression reminds us that he travels afoot, not with a caravan as Abraham's servant did decades before.

the land of the people of the east.—There may be an ominous tone in this. The "people of the east" (*bene qedem*, "children of the east") are enemies of Israel in Jud 7:12; 8:10.

2-9, *Jacob at the Well*

2 behold a well in the field.—Contrast 24:11, without the city by a well of water. The city is not evident here, or Jacob would not have had to ask the shepherds where they came from.

To understand the rock over the mouth of the well, we must recognize that biblical wells are often just holes in the ground, without a wall around them. The rock keeps things from falling in and polluting the water.

The shepherds wait until all the flocks have gathered before opening the well. Possible motives:

- The task of shepherding is often done by children. Cf. 1 Sam. 16:11; David, the youngest of Jesse's children, had the task of keeping the sheep. The stone may have been too much for the boys to move until all the flocks had gathered and they had their full reinforcements.
- There may be a custom of fairness. If water is scarce, it might be considered selfish for one shepherd to water his flock and perhaps deplete the supply before the others have arrived.

- They may be lazy. The shepherds are in no particular rush to return to the lonely fields; they enjoy the social environment around the well and use the previous two motives as excuses to delay getting back to work. Jacob, 57 years old, is more mature, and urges them to get back to work. In this case, Jacob's subsequent success in shepherding is to be expected, given the lassitude of his competition.
- They may be interested in Rachel! They know that she arrives about this time, and they like the opportunity to flirt with her. This may explain Jacob's desire to get them out of the picture in v.7.

4 And Jacob said unto them.—When the servant of Gen 24 arrives at the well, he gets his guidance from the Lord. His prayer is a model of personal faith. Jacob is not yet at this point of personal spiritual development. He seeks guidance from the shepherds.

10-12, Jacob and Rachel

Note the three-fold repetition of “Laban his mother's brother.” The servant was preoccupied with the girl, since that was what he had come to get. Jacob is clearly preoccupied with Laban. He was always his mother's boy, subject to her instructions, emotionally dependent on her, and now he transfers that attachment to Laban. This makes him particularly vulnerable to Laban's manipulations in the sequel.

The servant was particularly concerned with the qualifications of the girl, and watches her behavior closely to see whether she is fit to become Isaac's wife. Jacob exhibits no such discretion here. The moment he sees the girl, he sets out to impress her.

In Gen 24, it was the girl who performed superhuman acts in watering the servant's camels. Now it is Jacob, who single-handedly rolls away the cover from the well, and reveals to her who he is.

13-14, Jacob and Laban

Laban's eagerness at first resembles that which he showed toward the servant in 24:30. There he was motivated first by the earring and bracelet, and then by what Rebekah told him. Here he has only “the tidings,” but he still runs eagerly, probably harboring hopes that this visitor from Abraham's family has also come with rich gifts.

If so, he is soon disappointed, as Jacob tells him “all these things.” The servant's narrative described the motive for his journey, and we can assume that Jacob's did as well. This narrative would make it clear that Jacob is a penniless exile, not a visitor laden with gifts.

The particle that begins Laban's response in v.14 can have two meanings.

- The KJV reflects the more traditional interpretation, that Laban is overwhelmed with the evidence that Jacob has presented: “You really are my bone and my flesh.”
- However, what would be so persuasive, especially since Jacob's coming is much less auspicious than that of the servant years before? We should rather understand the particle restrictively, as Laban shrugs his shoulders and says with a sigh, “Well, at least you are my bone and my flesh.”

On the basis of this acknowledgement, he finds hospitality at Laban's house for a month.

15-30, Jacob Takes a Wife (or Two)

This episode shows the operation of God's harvest law (Gal 6:7). Jacob had gained the ascendancy over his brother by hard bargaining (ch. 25) and deception (ch. 27); now he himself becomes the object of both of these ploys. "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein," Prov 26:27.

15-19, The Negotiation

By their initial meeting and Jacob's report of "all things" (v.13), Laban knows several things about Jacob.

1. Jacob's mother wants him to stay away for a while. Jacob has time on his hands.
2. Jacob's father instructed him to take one of Laban's daughters to wife.
3. Jacob is penniless, unable to bring the required bride price.
4. The moving of the stone single-handed shows his strength. This is someone whose services could be useful to Laban.

Laban contrives to turn this to his advantage. His statement in v.15 sounds considerate, but actually reflects his greedy attitude. Jacob no doubt has been serving him during the month. This service has not been "for nought." He has had claim on Laban's hospitality for whatever he needs. Laban now wants to turn this open family relation into a commercial transaction with specific deliverables.

Laban may have observed Jacob's attention to his daughters. The two girls are presented to us in 17. The meaning of Leah's "tender eyes" is not clear. Literally, her eyes were "soft," "weak." Commentators often refer to the oriental preference for girls with bright, sparkly eyes, and in fact bright eyes are a sign of health.

Jacob's proposal shows how taken he is with Rachel.

- Deut 22:29 sets the maximum bride price at 50 shekels.
- Casual labors in Babylon received between 6 and 12 shekels a year (Driver and Miles, in Wenham).
- So Jacob's offer is worth between 42 and 84 shekels, a very handsome offer.

Laban's response offers "her," and does not explicitly name Rachel. He is no doubt already planning the deception that follows.

20-24, The Work and the Wedding

Jacob's labor "seemed unto him *but* a few days," reflecting his mother's instruction that he was to stay in Haran for "a few days," 27:44. He no doubt expects that once he receives Rachel, he will return to Canaan.

As the time draws near, he expects that Laban would begin to make arrangements for the wedding. But Laban shows no such initiative, and Jacob finally must take the initiative (v.21). The demand, "Give," has a sense of desperation about it in Genesis; compare 30:1 (Rachel's plea to Jacob for children) and 47:15 (the people of Egypt beg Joseph for food). Apparently Jacob is the only one counting the time; Laban would have let him work on forever if Jacob hadn't taken the initiative to ask for his wages.

But Jacob is counting, and when the time comes he asks for his wife. He is now 64 years old, and eager to get on with his family.

Laban assembles the people for the appropriate festivities. A key aspect of marriage in the Bible is the public commitment of the man and woman to each other. In ancient times this took the form of a party hosted by the parents.

The party is described as a “feast,” Heb. *mishteh*. The term is a general one for a banquet, but etymologically means “a drinking party,” and no doubt the wine Laban served helped further his deception, as he substitutes bleary-eyed Leah for beautifully Rachel.

25-30, The Deception Discovered

Now Jacob finds out how it feels to be deceived and manipulated. It was OK when he was doing it to Esau and his parents, but now, far from home, he is on the short end of the stick. He asks, “Wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?” “Beguile” is cognate to “deceit” in 27:35; the deceiver is now himself deceived.

Laban’s excuse is weak; if there were such a custom, he surely should have brought it up when the deal was first made seven years earlier. It probably contains a poke at Jacob. “Around here, we don’t put the younger before the elder (as you did to your brother Esau).”

Likely, this is not his true motive for switching the girls. He values Jacob’s labor, a point he later makes explicit in 30:27, “I have learned by experience that the LORD hath blessed me for thy sake.” He knows that Jacob’s original plan was to return after “a few days,” and we have already been told (v.20) that this is how Jacob views the period of seven years just elapsed. Laban proposes to use Rachel to keep this valuable employee around longer.

“Leah’s week” (vv. 27, 28) refers to the week of the wedding feast. Jacob did not have to wait another seven years for Rachel; he got her a week later, and then labored for seven more years to pay off the debt.

Laban certainly has outsmarted Jacob—but what a scoundrel he is. How inconsiderate of Leah’s feelings to use her in this way. She is foisted on a husband who does not love her, and then supplanted with a rival immediately after her honeymoon. Perhaps Jacob needs to see this ugly face of the flesh in order to realize the sinfulness of his own past actions. It is all part of God’s gracious process to purge him of the flesh and make him a man of faith.