

Genesis 30 Jacob Outsmarts Laban

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Overview

We have now turned the corner in the chiasm of Jacob's life.

Birth of Sons	25, Jacob and Esau	35, Benjamin
Relations with the People of the Land	26, Isaac in Gerar	34, Jacob in Shechem
Alienation and Reconciliation with Esau	27:1-28:9	33
Jacob Meets with God	28:10-22	32
Jacob comes to, and departs from, Padan-Aram and Laban	29:1-14	31
Each out bargains the other	29:15-30, for wives	30:25-43, for flocks
The birth of Jacob's Children	29:31-30:24	

The balance of chapter 30, like 29:15-30, deals with commercial transactions between Jacob and Laban.

25-34, Negotiation

25, 26, Jacob

By Kennicott's computation (see Clarke's commentary on 31:55), Jacob would be now about 84 years old. This would make his mother, Laban's sister, 144, so we should see Laban himself as of comparable age.

Send me away.—This is the same expression that Abraham's servant used in taking leave of Laban in 24:54, nearly a century before. The expression is a demand, not a polite request. Other instances:

- Gen 32:26, how the angel demands that Jacob release him at Peniel
- 1 Sam 19:17, Michal explains David's absence to Saul by saying, "He said unto me, 'Let me go [send me away]; why should I kill thee?'"
- softened with *n*) in 1 Sam 20:29, 1 Kings 11:21 Hadad's request to Pharaoh

Laban has held him a virtual captive; now he wants to return home.

mine own place, and ... my country.—Here his words contrast with the servant, who wanted to return "to my master." Jacob's thoughts are not on his family back home. We will see that meeting them (or at least Esau) actually causes him considerable apprehension. But he is beginning to see that the Lord has cared for him, and has in mind the land that was promised him at Bethel.

Give me my wives and my children.—Cf. Exod 21:1-4, which later stipulated that any wives and children acquired by an indentured servant would remain with the master. If this reflected a common custom in the ANE, Laban may have tried to retain control over the wives and children. This may suggest why Jacob later steals away.

my service which I have done thee.—There is evidence that Jacob has actually worked much longer than the 7 additional years originally agreed upon. The period is more likely on the order of 27 years after the wedding. It is difficult to fit the births of six of Leah's children, together with a period of barrenness, into 7 years. Jacob's case is that he has more than satisfied Laban's expectations.

27, 28, Laban

I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes.—These formulae indicate extreme deference. In response to Jacob's brusqueness, Laban is almost obsequious. Like many abusive managers, he backs off when he is about to lose a productive employee.

I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me.—This translation has two problems.

1. The verb "I have learned by experience" actually means, everywhere in the OT, "I have divined, I have used enchantments." This is actually quite credible, since he later is concerned over the theft of his household gods (31:30).
2. The syntax is not appropriate for indirect discourse. The two clauses are parallel: "I have used enchantment, and the Lord hath blessed me."

What we see is syncretism in Laban's beliefs. He is willing to acknowledge Jacob's God, whom he even names as "the Lord," but only as part of a broader system over which he (Laban) has influence by divination. This attitude is not uncommon, even today (though the "pagan gods" whom people mix in syncretistically are more likely to be money or fame: "I gave a lot of money to the church, and the Lord has blessed me." But it is none the less deadly, and a dishonor to the Lord, who will respond by showing Laban that he is not at all in control.

Laban's use of "Lord" is interesting. He did not learn this name from Jacob, who hasn't spoken it all the time he has been in Haran (and only twice before that, at Bethel). Rather, he retains a knowledge of it from Abram's days. In 24:31 he greets the servant with this name, even though the servant has not yet spoken of it to him. Laban is an example of someone who says, "Lord, Lord," but is not obedient to the Lord.

- This is an example of what the Ten Commandments will later forbid as "tak[ing] the name of the Lord thy God in vain" (Exod 20:7).
- Our Lord refers to this attitude when he describes those who say "Lord, Lord," but are not subject to him, Matt 7:21,22.

There are two warnings here for us.

1. Do not assume someone is a believer, just because they appropriate the name of the Lord. There are many wolves in sheep's clothing abroad in the world today, who have heard the name of the Lord and use it to become part of the in-crowd, but do not really trust the Lord or obey him.

2. We must be careful that our own lives are consistent with our profession of faith, and not bring upon ourselves the guilt of taking the Lord's name in vain.

Appoint me thy wages.—This sounds generous, but it is a classic bargaining ploy, trying to get the other party to name a price first.

29, 30, Jacob

Jacob has learned something about bargaining too. He is not at all eager to name a price.

Instead he emphasizes his value to Laban. Like Laban, he acknowledges the Lord's blessing. Like Laban, he agrees that he is the proximate cause of the blessings

- Laban: "The Lord hath blessed me for thy sake"
- Jacob: "The Lord hath blessed thee since my coming," literally, "at my foot," we might say, "wherever I went."

His explanation, though, is different.

- Laban attributed the Lord's blessing to his divination.
- Jacob attributes it to his own diligent service: "Thou knowest how I have served thee." Recall his conversation with the local shepherds at the well when he first arrived in Haran. The local standards of diligence in animal husbandry were quite low, and he has exceeded them.

This is the first time that Jacob has used the Lord's name in Haran. Probably, he is shamed into it by Laban's example. His own conduct continues to show that his trust in the Lord is at best immature.

31, Laban

Laban still will not make an offer, but insists that Jacob bid first. His offer to "give" something suggests that he thinks he can buy Jacob's service at a fixed price.

31-33, Jacob

Jacob insists rather on being rewarded according to the productivity of the flock. We know from Mesopotamian records of the time that a reasonable wage for a shepherd was 20% of the increase of the flock, but Jacob takes a different tack. He proposes to take distinctively marked animals as his hire. Sheep are generally white, and goats are generally black; any mottled animals will be his.

His approach has two characteristics that should appeal to Laban.

1. It is completely verifiable.
2. It is apparently beyond the reach of cheating (though the sequel shows that he tries to cheat anyway).

34, Laban

Laban accepts this suggestion.

35-42, Execution

35-36, Laban's Preparation

Jacob had suggested that he (Jacob) would do the initial sorting of the flocks. But Laban, ever suspicious, steps in to do it, so that Jacob cannot leave any marked animals behind. Then he separates them three days' journey from the flock under Jacob's care, to prevent any interbreeding among them.

37-42, Jacob's Ruse

Jacob's offer sounded as though he was getting the short end of the stick, especially with the rigorous measures that Laban has taken to remove the marked animals. But Jacob thinks he has a trick up his sleeve, showing his lack of trust in the Lord. This trick has two parts.

1. He believes that impressions on the animals at the time of conception will affect the offspring, so he exposes them to splotchy things: peeled sticks (37), and animals already born that were mottled (40), in an effort to increase the incidence of strangely-colored animals.
2. He employs this ruse only when the stronger animals mate (41-42), thus leading to more robust animals for himself.

The second part of his trick is sound animal husbandry, but the first part has puzzled readers, especially in the light of modern genetics. Jacob's long experience as a shepherd must have suggested to him that this trick would help increase the proportion of spotted animals born. A number of explanations have been proposed. The most persuasive combines two observations.

1. Extracts of these particular plants were used in antiquity as aphrodisiacs. By placing the peeled branches in the water, he may have stimulated the animals to breed. This is reinforced by the Hebrew of v.39, which says that the animals "came into heat" when they drank.
2. The more vigorous animals would have been the heterozygous ones, the ones carrying the recessive genes that resulted in mixed coloration. By preferentially breeding these animals, he would increase the expression of these recessive qualities.

Whatever the explanation, the important point is that Jacob is trying to tilt the odds in his favor. In fact, the text doesn't say that the trick worked. It simply states (v.39) that the animals conceived (or "came into heat") before the rods, and that they brought forth multicolored offspring, but it doesn't make the causal connection. In the next chapter, God reveals to Jacob that the cause of his growing wealth is not his rod trick, but God's sovereign provision for him.

Jacob's ruse shows that his trust is not in the Lord, but in his own cunning. He is as syncretistic as Laban.

43-31:1, Outcome

v.43 echoes 24:35, when Abraham's servant described to Laban his master's wealth, and to a lesser extent 26:13-14, describing Isaac's prosperity. At the start of this engagement, Jacob was concerned how he would provide for his own house (v.30). Now he has now grow as wealthy as his fathers.

Not surprisingly, his success stimulates jealousy on the part of Laban's sons. His growing wealth does not bring him respect in the community.

Technical note on v.27.

AV renders this as indirect discourse, "I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me."

Two corrections to this are proposed in the literature:

1. *nx\$* elsewhere means, "to divine, to use enchantments." So one translation is, "I have learned by divination." This would certainly be credible for Laban, given his subsequent concern over his household gods.
2. But where else is indirect discourse introduced with *waw*? The coordination leads modern scholars to seek to make the two parallel, and seek an Akkadian sense for *nx\$* "to prosper," thus, "I have prospered, and the Lord has blessed me." This is smoother syntactically, but a stretch concerning Hebrew lexical usage.

Coordinated clauses could have another sense, a causal one, and this would let us preserve both Hebrew syntax and lexicon: "I have divined, and (as a result) the Lord has blessed me for your sake." Such syncretism would be entirely in character for Laban.

Use of LORD *yhwh* in the Jacob Cycle

Jacob: first in the condition he states at Bethel (28:16, 21), then not until 30:30, in negotiation with Laban

His wives in naming their sons: Leah in 29:32, 33, 35, and Rachel in 30:24

Laban in 30:27, stating his perception of Jacob's benefit to him. Where had he learned this name? Not from Jacob, who is silent concerning it, but from the servant a century earlier; Gen 24 has more instances of *yhwh* than any other chapter in Genesis, and Laban actually uses the name there, twice: vv. 31, 50, 51. In fact, Laban's use of the name as he greets the servant in 31 suggests that the name was known in Abram's family before he left Haran.