

Genesis 31 Jacob Flees from Laban

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Overview

2-16, Jacob Decides to Leave

Three things stimulate Jacob to take his leave and return to Canaan: discomfort in his present situation, an explicit instruction from the Lord, and the concurrence of his family. How blessed it is when indications agree in this way.

1-2, *Laban's Antagonism*

(Technical Note: v.1 is strictly part of the previous paragraph (no proper noun), but forms a transition to this section by contrasting the overt opposition of Laban's sons with the silent antagonism of Laban.)

Jacob faces antagonism from two sources: Laban's sons (jealous of Jacob's success), and Laban himself. Laban's sons speak outwardly of their bitterness; Laban is craftier, but his countenance still reveals his opposition.

Jacob has now, by Kennicott's reckoning, been in Haran for 40 years. He may be a little delinquent in returning to Bethel, and Calvin well observes,

“For if Laban had treated him kindly and pleasantly, his mind would have been lulled to sleep; but now he is driven away by adverse looks. So the Lord often better secures the salvation of his people, by subjecting them to the hatred, the envy, and the malevolence of the wicked, than by suffering them to be soothed with bland address. It was far more useful to holy Jacob to have his father-in-law and his sons opposed, than to have them courteously obsequious to his wishes; because their favor might have deprived him of the blessing of God. We also have more than sufficient experience of the power of earthly attractions, and of the ease with which, when they abound, the oblivion of celestial blessings steals over us. Wherefore let us not think it hard to be awakened by the Lord, when we fall into adversity, or receive but little favor from the world; for hatred, threats, disgrace, and slanders, are often more advantageous to us than the applause of all men on every side.”

3, *The Lord's Instruction*

Circumstances by themselves can be deceptive. In the midst of this opposition, the Lord speaks to him directly, with a command motivated by a promise. Calvin: “Let us learn from this example, that although the Lord may incite us to duty by adversity, yet we shall thereby profit little, unless the stimulus of the word be added.” The way to discern the Lord's direction is to seek the intersection of circumstances and his Word.

The **command** is to return both to the land and to his kindred. When he had originally asked leave of Laban to return (30:25), his focus was entirely on the land: “Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country.” His thoughts then were on the promised land. His family posed a threat more than an attraction. But the Lord gently reminds him of his obligations toward them, and sends him back not only to the land, but also to be reconciled with his brother.

The **promise** is the oft-repeated “I will be with thee.” Recall our discussion in ch. 28, at Bethel, where God made this promise as Jacob set out on his journey.

4-16, Family Counsel

There is yet a third component in discerning the Lord’s leading: the counsel of other believers. In Jacob’s case, these are his family.

4-13, Jacob Presents the Case for Leaving

His wives and their children apparently do not follow the flock with him, so he summons them to the field, and presents them with the two bodies of evidence that have been working in his mind, Laban’s antagonism and the Lord’s revelation.

5-9, Laban’s Antagonism

Note the alternation here between descriptions of Laban’s perfidy, and Jacob’s growing awareness of the Lord’s providential care.

I see your father’s countenance, that it /is not toward me as before;	but the God of my father hath been with me.
⁶ And ye know that with all my power I have served your father. ⁷ And your father hath deceived me, and changed my wages ten times;	but God suffered him not to hurt me.
⁸ If he said thus, The speckled shall be thy wages; then all the cattle bare speckled: and if he said thus, The ringstraked shall be thy hire; then bare all the cattle ringstraked.	⁹ Thus God hath taken away the cattle of your father, and given <i>them</i> to me.

The God of my father hath been with me.—Jacob here confesses that God has fulfilled his promise of 28:15. In addition, note the contrast between “your father’s countenance” and “the God of my father.” Once spiteful of his father, Jacob is coming to realize that in spite of Isaac’s faults, he is far better than the alternative (Laban). Compare Mark Twain:

When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years.

In particular, he is coming to value the God whom his father worshipped.

Changed my wages.—Apparently, during the six years that Jacob was breeding flocks, Laban sought to fine-tune the agreement to his own advantage, but to no avail.

10-13, Divine Revelation

Note several details about this revelation:

When does the revelation take place?—We have two time notices.

1. “at the time that the cattle conceived”: It is breeding season, when (according to 30:37-39) Jacob plays his game with the rods. Jacob has been playing this game for six years now, without the benefit of this revelation; this is likely the last breeding season before he departed.

2. “in a dream”: Jacob is asleep. Jacob has done his manipulations, and is now inactive.

How does it take place?—It has two parts: a vision of piebald rams, and then an explanation by the Lord. The interesting thing about the vision is that it attributes the growth of the piebald flock, not to Jacob’s rods, but to the identify of the males. Jacob sees them as all white, but the Lord reveals them as really piebald themselves. We would say, he makes their recessive genes visible.

Who speaks to Jacob?—The one who speaks with him is called “the angel of God,” but also identifies himself, “I am the God of Bethel.” This is another confirmation of the deity of this being who reveals himself frequently throughout the patriarchal era. We recognize him as the preincarnate Word of God, “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Micah 5:2).

The forcefulness of the vision as related by Jacob assumes a knowledge of the episode at Bethel. Thus it appears that Jacob has told his wives of his experience forty years before, and of the promises of God toward him.

What does he say?—The Lord’s words fall into four parts.

1. Call to attention. The Lord makes it clear that he is speaking to Jacob. Compare his summons to Abraham at the Aqedah (22:1, 11), Moses from the burning bush (Exod 3:4), Samuel (1 Sam 3:6). He knows us by name and deals with us personally and individually.
2. He takes credit for the increase of Jacob’s flock. He explains that he has intervened (“I have seen...”) to ensure that the recessive traits are amplified. The increase is due to his intervention, not Jacob’s skill.
3. He identifies himself as “the God of Bethel,” and reminds Jacob of the vow that he made there in 28:20-21. That vow had the following conditions:

If God will be with me.—In 30:30, Jacob acknowledge that this has been done, when he says that “the Lord hath blessed thee at my foot,” meaning that the Lord’s blessings have followed him around.

and will keep me in this way that I go.—This is a prayer for protection in his journey to Haran, and it was fulfilled when he arrived there in ch. 29.

and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on.—He has had these minimal requirements met ever since he was in Laban’s house. Now the Lord has enriched him far beyond these requirements, by giving him extensive riches of his own.

So that I come again to my father's house in peace.—The last condition is his safe return to Canaan. Clearly, this depends on his making the return trip.

So God’s identification of himself as the God of Bethel is his way of calling Jacob to his vow. “You made a vow that was contingent on my protection of you. I have protected you. Now it’s time for you to return home.”

4. He commands Jacob to leave Haran and return to “the land of thy kindred.” Jacob would rather avoid thinking about his “kindred,” Esau in particular, but the Lord directly instructs him to go back, and calls this threatening aspect to his attention. He must not avoid dealing with Esau, but should confront the issue. We cannot run away from interpersonal issues, but must deal with them.

14-16, Rachel and Leah Concur

In spite of their past disagreements, Rachel and Leah are of one mind that life with Jacob is better than life with their father. Laban's treachery toward them has completely destroyed their loyalty toward him. He has treated them like foreigners, not like his own family, in two ways:

He hath sold us.—That is, in how he dealt with them in securing Jacob's service. They were only items of merchandise in his view. Leopold: "the daughters knew a better mode of giving in marriage to have been the custom even in their day."

He ... hath quite devoured also our money.—A large part of the bride price was to be given to the bride. Rachel and Leah were not entirely without dowery, for Laban had given them handmaidens. But they clearly think that they were entitled to a larger share of what he had received in the bargain.

Thus they, unlike their brothers, view the transfer of Laban's wealth to Jacob as just, and cast their lot in with him.

17-23, Jacob Leaves and Laban Pursues

17-21, Flight

Then Jacob rose up.—Jacob immediately packs up his family to leave.

(Technical note: This is an external inclusio with v.21. The details in between are necessary to understand Laban's comments in the sequel.)

to go to Isaac his father.— The reference to Isaac his father is touching. Originally, his desire was only toward the land (30:25), but the Lord has explicitly commanded him to return to his kindred (v.3). Jacob once thought so little of his father that he would deceive him. Now, having seen just how bad a father can be, and himself a father twelve times over, he longs for restoration to his own father, and in his preparations this one person dominates his thoughts. Later in his life, he will make another arduous journey to see his son Joseph (45:28).

And Laban went to shear his sheep.—Laban's flock was three days from Jacob, and the sheepsheering was a busy time accompanied with much celebration, so Laban would not notice Jacob's preparations. This is fortunate for Jacob and his family, for it enables two thefts of Laban's property to take place. These are described as thefts because Laban can legitimately complain that they deprive him of what is rightly his, and in fact he will shortly make just this complaint. Jacob's departure is the culminating scene in the selfish struggle between Jacob and Laban.

- "Rachel stole the images that were her father's," small household idols. She sees the material advantage of allying herself with her husband rather than with her father, but she is not yet trusting in the Lord, and carries the family deities with her as a good luck charm, a "St. Christopher." This theft is clearly wrong, both in taking Laban's property, and in adhering to pagan deities rather than following the Lord with a whole heart. And in fact the ensuing story will show just how impotent the idols are.

Jacob does not know of this theft (32). For all his carnality, we have no reason to think that he has succumbed to the idolatry of Haran, and he would no doubt have condemned Rachel for this weakness. Rachel's presence in Jacob's party leaving Haran may be

compared with the presence of the mixed multitude in Israel when they left Egypt more than four centuries later. These incidents remind us that when God's people are on pilgrimage, they may often be accompanied by those who do not completely share their convictions. Discipline in the church is intended to minimize this risk and uncover such false brethren; compare 1 John 2:19.

- “Jacob stole the heart of Laban” (Heb.). Two observations are pertinent here.
 - From the context, it is clear that this means he “stole away,” leaving unannounced, as the AV interprets it. Jacob is justified in leaving, but when Laban challenges him over the mode of his departure, he cites fear rather than the Lord's direction as justification (v.31). He ought not to have continued his deceptiveness, but rather told his father-in-law of his departure and trusted in the Lord to handle the circumstances.
 - The expression itself invites deeper attention. “Steal away” in English carries no moral opprobrium, but “to steal” in Hebrew always indicates something that is not right. The point here is that Jacob deceived Laban. He did not deal with him openly and transparently, and thus he was culpable.

So he fled.—Because of these “thefts,” his departure is described as a flight. The last three clauses pick up where 17a left off. Heading west, he crosses the Euphrates. “Mount Gilead” in later scripture refers to the mountains west of the Jordan between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, a considerable distance for Jacob to cover with his flocks in only ten days. But the name is related to that of the cairn that Jacob erected to memorialize his covenant with Laban (vv.46-49) and as a boundary marker, and may refer to a location somewhat closer to Haran.

22-23, Pursuit

It was told Laban on the third day.—Thanks to Laban's paranoid separation of the two flocks, Jacob has a three-day head start, and it takes Laban a week to catch up with him.

He took his brethren with him.—“His brethren” here are family and friends that he has gathered to support him. Such a force would not be necessary if he were just coming to say good-bye. Clearly, he has forceful actions in mind. “Doubtless this pursuit, undertaken with such vehemence by Laban, was for the purpose of bringing back Jacob with all his family and all his wealth, and under the pretext that he had taken flight and had been guilty of theft, to retain him henceforth as a captive, and to subject him to perpetual slavery.”—Rivetus (Huguenot, 1572-1651) in Genesis.

24-55, The Final Encounter of Jacob and Laban

24-25, God Prepares Laban

We already read in v.23 that Laban overtook Jacob. Now the camera zooms in a bit, and we learn that just before he overtook his son-in-law, the Lord intervened.

To protect Jacob, God reveals himself to Laban. This revelation is noteworthy for several reasons.

1. Note the *means* of this revelation. Laban thinks that his knowledge of the Lord comes from divination (30:27), but now he gets a taste of the ability of the true God to make himself known. This must have been a terrifying experience to him. Compare Job 42:5,6, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”
2. Note the *motive*. God would leave Laban in spiritual darkness, except for the sake of Jacob. When the welfare of his elect is at stake, he will intervene with any hostile force to protect him. Cf. God’s revelation to Abimelech in Gen 20:3, protecting Abraham’s family from harm by Abimelech (even though Abraham is in the wrong). We should not fear the powers of this world; our God is greater than them all.
3. Note the *message*: “Take heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad.” At first glance this seems to forbid him to speak at all, and his subsequent behavior would suggest that he ignored it. But it actually has more of a forensic thrust, where “speak” has the sense of declaring a judgment or taking judicial action. Laban as the head of the family would be able to make a judicial declaration concerning Jacob, to force him to return to Haran. God here effectively declares Jacob out of Laban’s jurisdiction. Cf. Laban’s understanding of this phrase in v.29, as annulling “the power of my hand.” Cf. also parallels in 2 Sam 13:22 (where Absalom did not take action against Amnon) and 24:50 (where Laban did not intervene in the servant’s decision).
4. Note the *timing*, the night before Laban catches up with Jacob (v.29).

26-30, Laban Accuses Jacob

Note the repetition of the word “steal” in this paragraph (26, 27, 30), recalling the twofold theft in vv. 19-20. Laban’s words have a strong legal tone. As head of the family he is making a formal accusation against Jacob.

It is a painful thing when someone with no loyalty to the Lord rebukes a believer, but sometimes such an experience is a necessary means of developing maturity, and it no doubt serves this function here (just as the rebukes of Pharaoh and Abimelech did for Abraham and Isaac). Compare God’s use of pagan nations to chastise Israel, culminating in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The whole point of the book of Habakkuk is this mode of divine instruction.

His accusation deals with both aspects of the theft.

26-29, Accusation of Taking his Daughters

Laban’s accusation takes the form of two questions and two statements.

26, What hast thou done.—This is the classical accusation, beginning with God’s accusation of Adam in the garden (3:13) and to Cain after he murdered Abel (4:10), also of Pharaoh (12:18) and Abimelech (20:9) to Abraham on his deceptions about Sarah, Abimelech to Isaac (26:10), and most recently, Jacob to Laban (29:25) in the bridal deception. These examples show the seriousness of the charge; it is not just a casual inquiry. He goes on to describe the crime from his perspective:

- *thou hast stolen away unawares to me*—lit., “stolen my heart,” or “deceived me.”

- *carried away my daughters*—he considers it unjust for Jacob to remove his daughters from his house. Recall our discussion of Exod 21:1-4, which stipulates that a slave’s wife remains in the master’s home if the slave leaves.

27 Wherefore.—Laban adds “why” to “what,” as Jacob did in 29:25. He repeats the charge of deception, and suggests that he would have released his daughters freely if Jacob had only asked. In all likelihood, this detail is completely deceptive; he would have tried to keep Jacob as long as he could.

28b thou hast now done foolishly.—This particular term for acting foolishly always has a moral tone. It indicate, not just lack of understanding, but moral culpability. Compare David’s confession after numbering the people in 2 Sam 24:10: “And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.”

29 It is in the power of my hand.—The power he claims is the right of the head of the family to dispose of his affairs. His claim reinforces our understanding that though married, Jacob was still subject to his control. But he is conscious of the divine warning, and so will not take any action.

30, Accusation of Taking his Gods

In the second accusation, Laban grants that Jacob may have had a reasonable motivation for his sudden departure. “I suppose you were so eager to get home after all these years that you just had to leave.” But it expresses complete bewilderment as to why he should steal Laban’s idols.

Notice the contrast between the ends of the two accusations: “the God of thy father” vs. “my gods.”

- The God of Isaac is able to speak even to someone who does not honor him, with such authority and obvious power as to compel obedience.
- The idols are so impotent that they can be stolen. Gill: “he could never think they were truly and really gods, that could not preserve themselves from being stolen away, and that must be a poor god that a man may be robbed of.”

Consider the irony of the case. Laban is fully convinced of the power of the God of Isaac, and forced to admit the impotence of his own deities. Yet he persists in rejecting the true and cleaving to the false. We should understand that the reason people reject God is a matter of will and not of knowledge. They simply will not submit to him, and all the intellectual arguments are merely a smokescreen.

31-32, Jacob’s Defense

Jacob responds to both accusations: to the accusation of deceiving Laban by stealing away in 31, and to the accusation of stealing the gods in 32.

31, I was afraid.—An honest answer, but not a very edifying one. Jacob is the patriarch most marked by fear—initially of God’s manifestation (28:17), but also of Laban (here) and Esau (32:7,11). God spoke his words, “fear not,” to Abraham (15:1) and Isaac (26:24), but Jacob does not hear them until his descent into Egypt years later (46:3). Ironically, the more we fear God, the less we fear men. Jacob himself describes God as “the fear of Isaac,” 31:42,53, who therefore did not need to fear men.

Jacob's particular fear was that Laban would retain his daughters by force.

32, with whomsoever ...—Concerning the theft of the gods, Jacob is ignorant. The decree of death is perhaps related to the sixth (out of 282) of Hammurabi's laws, roughly contemporary with Jacob: "If any one steal the property of a temple or of the court, he shall be put to death, and also the one who receives the stolen thing from him shall be put to death." He does not know that in so speaking, he has sentenced his favorite wife to death.

33-35, Laban's Futile Search

In best dramatic style, Moses recounts how Laban searches the camp, culminating with the tent where in fact the idols are hidden. Note the marginal reading in v.34; he physically felt everything in the tent that he could, searching for the idols. The image of a customs officer feeling through a suitcase comes to mind.

Rachel, to conceal the idols, is forced to defile them; Lev 15:20 no doubt reflects an understanding wider than just Israel in decreeing, "Every thing that she lieth upon in her separation shall be unclean: every thing also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean." Not only are the idols unable to protect themselves from being stolen; they must also submit to the unspeakable degradation of deliberate defilement. Rachel will no longer be able to view them in quite the same light after this experience.

36-42, Jacob Rebukes Laban

Jacob had been meek in the face of Laban's initial accusations (31-32), but now that Laban has found nothing, the tables are reversed, and he takes the offensive, beginning with a protestation of innocence, then emphasizing his active integrity, and finally asserting Laban's unfairness.

36-37, "What is my trespass?"—Laban had come asserting his authority of the head of the family. Now Jacob asserts his own equality with Laban, calling him to account before a council of both of their kinsmen. Laban has searched ("felt his way through") all of Jacob's baggage and found nothing. How can he possibly accuse Jacob, or justify his angry pursuit?

38, 41, This twenty years.—Both of these verses belong with the same expression, which is translated literally in v.38. Traditionally, these are understood to apply to the same 20 year period, making 20 years that Jacob was away from home. This interpretation faces two difficulties, one chronological, the other grammatical. See Clarke's Commentary on Gen 31:55 for Kennicott's exposition of the chronology. (Kennicott: 1718-1783)

Why is this important: we need to see that the text fits together as history, and is not just a pastiche of stories.

Chronologically, a 20 year sojourn leads to several anomalies. See the accompanying chart. To set the background for these, note that

- Line 13, Jacob is 130 when he enters Egypt (47:9).
- At that time, Joseph has been in office nine years (seven years of plenty and two of famine) (45:6).
- Line 12, But Joseph was 30 when he met Pharaoh (41:46), so Jacob 130 = Joseph 39, and Joseph was born when Jacob was 91.

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- Line 7, Joseph was born six years before Jacob left Haran, 30:25; 31:38,41.
- Line 8, Therefore Jacob left Haran at age $91 + 6 = 97$.
- Thus a 20 year sojourn means that Jacob left Canaan at age 77, Line 5a.

But this chronology is too compressed.

- We have already noted that this leaves only seven years for the birth of all of his children. This is particularly difficult in the case of Leah, who bears seven children and also has a time without children long enough for her to feel that she is barren.
- Consider the location of line 5. At the time Jacob leaves Canaan, Esau goes to Ishmael to get a wife, 28:9. This must be before Ishmael's death in 25:17 at the age of 137. He is 14 years older than Isaac, who is 60 years older than Jacob, so Jacob is $137 - 14 - 60 = 63$. But on the 20 year theory, Jacob doesn't leave Canaan until he is 77, 14 years after Ishmael has died.
- *The following argument from Jacob's descendants is not relevant. Two of the three generations must follow Joseph's captivity and thus fit into $39 - 17 = 22$ years, whether or not we have an extra twenty years. It is better to argue that the children of Pharez were born in Egypt, as were the children of Joseph; see Waltke.*

There's not enough time for the subsequent generations. Consider:

- Judah, the fourth of Leah's first batch of children, must be born at Jacob $77 + 7 + 3 = 87$ to account for Leah's story.
- He begets three generations before Jacob goes to Egypt:
 - Er, Onan, and Shua, 38:1-5
 - Er marries Tamar, 38:6. After some years of dallying, Judah marries her and begets Pharez and Zarah, 38:29,30
 - Two of Pharez's sons, Hezron and Hamul, go down into Egypt with Jacob = 130, 46:12.

But this means that three generations must grow to maturity in $130 - 87 = 43$ years, requiring Jacob, Er, and Pharez all to marry at the age of 14.

Grammatically, the repetition of "this" (*zeh...zeh*) in 38, 41 is suggestive. Elsewhere, repetition of this demonstrative pronoun indicates enumeration: Cf. Job 21:23,25; Gen 29:27. On this basis, Kennicott (an 18th century scholar) suggests that these verses refer to two different periods of 20 years, totaling 40. This would solve the difficulties noted above:

- Jacob would leave Canaan at age 57 rather than 77, when Ishmael is still alive at 131 and able to negotiate with Esau for a wife.
- The wives now have 27 years to produce their children.
- Judah is now born as early as Jacob 67, leaving 63 years for him, his sons, and his grandsons to grow to maturity.

Consider these two periods, starting with 41-42.

- 41, “this twenty years for myself in your house.” He served twenty years under contract for his own benefit: 14 for the daughters and 6 for the marked cattle. In spite of the contract, Laban changed his wages. We saw that in the case of the daughters, when he swapped Leah for Rachel, and also in his report to his wives in 31:7,8.
- 38-40, “this twenty years I was with you,” working as a bondservant without any contractual benefit. This period would have fallen between the 14 years of service for the wives and the final six years of service that build Jacob’s own flock. During this time he did not even claim that which was his. 39, “I bare the loss of it,” even though under ANE law the shepherd was not liable for losses to the flock due to accident or wild animal:
 - Hammurabi 266, “If the animal be killed in the stable by God (an accident), or if a lion kill it, the herdsman shall declare his innocence before God, and the owner bears the accident in the stable.”
 - Exod 22:10-13

42, except the God of my father.—Jacob attributes his prosperity, not to any unjust flight from Laban, but to God’s hand on him, and claims the revelation to Laban as evidence of his divinely protected status.

Note the title, “the fear of Isaac,” subjective genitive, “the one whom Isaac feared.” Compare Isa 8:13: when confronted with threats from men, we are not to fear them, but “Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.” This insight is a tremendous progress from the fear of men in v.31. The appropriateness of this emotion is not diminished in the NT:

- 2 Cor 7:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness **in the fear of God**.
- Eph 5:21 Submitting yourselves one to another **in the fear of God**.
- Col 3:22 Servants, obey in all things *your* masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, **fearing God**:
- Heb 12:28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may **serve God** acceptably **with reverence and godly fear**:

42, except God ... had been with me.—If this were the correct translation, we would expect the same preposition used in the promises of 28:15 and 31:3. This preposition is better translated, “had been for me,” as in Psa 118:6, 7 (e.t. “taketh my part”); 124:1. In the NT, Rom 8:31. (These show that this attitude is not defective, *pace* Jos 5:13,14; there, Joshua did not recognize the one with whom he spoke.)

43-55, The Covenant

43, These daughters...—This protest can be read in two ways.

1. Laban may be defending himself against Jacob’s charges. “Why, how could you say such things? These are my own family. Whatever makes you think I would withhold them from you? How could I do anything that would harm them?” But this doesn’t make sense for the cattle.

2. Better (Wenham), Laban is completely defeated at this point, and reduced to whimpering helplessly as he sees his goods trickle away from him. “This is mine, all mine, and yet I can’t do anything to retain control of it.”

On this reading, we see in 42-43 the two ends to which grasping, selfish men may come. Jacob and Laban start out life very much alike. Yet they end in very different states.

- Jacob ends up recognizing the Lord as the only sure defense, and trusting in him.
- Laban ends up deprived of the wealth that had been his real god.

The only difference between them is God’s gracious choice and intervention in Jacob’s life, and the lack of this in Laban’s.

44, let us make a covenant.—This is the culmination of Laban’s surrender. He came to Jacob as a superior claiming power over him (29), but now he is forced to recognize him as an equal with whom he must make a covenant. His motive is his own protection from Jacob’s newly manifested power, as vv. 48-52 make clear.

Several features mark the covenant.

- 45, A memorial structure. Jacob sets up a pillar (as he did at Bethel), to which his servants add stones to construct a heap. He is eager to live in peace with his father in law, and acquiesces in whatever reasonable request Laban will make.
- 46, a communal meal, which is a regular feature of biblical covenants. The Lord’s Supper is another example of this.
- 47-48, the guarantors of the covenant. Laban designates both the heap and the Lord as witnesses of the covenant.
 - The heap: When applied to things, the word has the sense of “evidence,” which bears witness by its existence. Other cases of things as witnesses (other than songs or texts, which speak through the reader or singer):
 - The altar constructed by the children of Reuben and Gad in Jos 22:34
 - An altar and a pillar at the border of Egypt, Isa 19:19,20
 - Exod 22:13, the carcass of a sheep killed by wild beasts; we would say “evidence.”
 - The Lord: Laban again reveals his polytheism. He uses the name of YHWH (49), but also clearly thinks of the gods of the families as distinct, for “judge” in v.51 is plural, and we should probably understand the plural *elohim* here as numerical as well: “the gods of Abraham, and the gods of Nahor, the gods of their father, may they all judge between us.” Note in v.49 that the famous “Mizpah benediction” is actually a mark of deep suspicion, not of good will.
 - It is Laban who calls for witnesses. Jacob merely promises by the fear of Isaac. Laban is the suspicious one. Jacob’s faith is increasing.
- 50, 52, the terms of the covenant. These are stipulated by Laban, and clearly show his sense of helplessness against Jacob.

- 50, though he has reduced his own daughters to bigamy, he does not want Jacob to worsen their lot by taking other wives. All of a sudden he becomes the concerned ather.
- 52, he wants a mutual nonaggression pact between the two families.

54, his brethren.—Note the consistent distinction between the two parties: Laban’s brethren (21, 23, 25) and Jacob’s (37). Both groups are in view in 32. This is not the joint covenant meal of v.46. Rather, Jacob draws aside with those of his own household to give thanks to God for the peaceful outcome of the encounter.

Technical Notes

Zeh in v.31

“thus” as in AV? Or correlative with v.38? Other examples where *zeh* = “thus” in AV:

- Josh 7:10 *lamah zeh*
- Judg 8:1
- Judg 13:18 *lamah zeh*
- Judg 18:4 (x2) *ky zeh*
- 1 Sam 26:18 *lamah zeh*
- 1K 14:5 (2x) *kzeh*
- Est 2:18 *bzeh*
- Job 27:12 *lamah zeh*

Role of repetition in 23 and 25

Both verses repeat that Laban overtook Jacob. This might be an *inclusio* marking off the divine appearance to Laban. Or it might be a telescoping: we have the summary of the pursuit in 23, which is then amplified in 24ff to show the details both before and after (note the increased detail about encampments in v.25).