

Genesis 30:25 – 31:16

^{30:25} Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. ²⁶ Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered you.’ ²⁷ But Laban said to him, ‘If now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined that the LORD has blessed me on your account.’ ²⁸ He continued, ‘Name me your wages, and I will give it.’ ²⁹ But he said to him, ‘You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. ³⁰ For you had little before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?’ ³¹ So he said, ‘What shall I give you?’ And Jacob said, ‘You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: ³² let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. ³³ So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen.’ ³⁴ Laban said, ‘Good, let it be according to your word.’ ³⁵ So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons. ³⁶ And he put a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban’s flocks. ³⁷ Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white stripes in them, exposing the white which was in the rods. ³⁸ He set the rods which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the gutters, even in the watering troughs, where the flocks came to drink; and they mated when they came to drink. ³⁹ So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. ⁴⁰ Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban; and he put his own herds apart, and did not put them with Laban’s flock. ⁴¹ Moreover, whenever the stronger of the flock were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the sight of the flock in the gutters, so that they might mate by the rods; ⁴² but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban’s and the stronger Jacob’s. ⁴³ So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys. ^{31:1} Now Jacob heard the words of Laban’s sons, saying, ‘Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth.’ ² Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly. ³ Then the LORD said to Jacob, ‘Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.’ ⁴ So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, ⁵ and said to them, ‘I see your father’s attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶ You know that I have served your father with all my strength. ⁷ Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. ⁸ If he spoke thus, ‘The speckled shall be your wages,’ then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, ‘The striped shall be your wages,’ then all the flock brought forth striped. ⁹ Thus God has taken away your father’s livestock and given them to me. ¹⁰ And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled, and mottled. ¹¹ Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am.’ ¹² He said, ‘Lift up now

your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.’ ¹⁴ Rachel and Leah said to him, ‘Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father’s house? ¹⁵ Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. ¹⁶ Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Jacob’s History of Trickery*: Jacob tricked his brother Esau by appealing to his appetite, using red stew. Jacob tricked his father Isaac also by appealing to his appetite, using goats (Gen.27:16).
- *What Jacob Learned from Leah and Rachel’s Conflict*: In the previous passage, Jacob learned by observing the two sisters Leah and Rachel that God blesses life when we partner with Him to bless others.
- *Laban Exploited Jacob*: ‘During the first seven years of their marriage contract, Laban should have allowed Jacob to prepare for his household; instead, he left him empty-handed.’¹
- *Jacob Offers to Handicap Himself*: ‘In a flock of sheep and goats, the sheep are mostly all white, the goats all black or dark brown. Multicolored sheep and goats are much rarer. Jacob suggests that all the multicolored animals be his wage and that the pure white sheep and the dark goats be Laban’s.’² ‘Normally the hire of a shepherd is 20 percent of the flock, and rarely, if ever, would the speckled population be such a large percentage.’³
 - First, Jacob seems to make them mate more often (30:37 – 38). ‘Sarna says that these three trees, which have toxic substances used medicinally in the ancient world, may have had the effect of hastening the onset of the estrus cycle and so heightened [the animal’s] readiness to copulate.’⁴ Jacob sees that ‘strong animals are liable to produce sturdy offspring and vice versa... The vigorous animals were hybrids, whose recessive coloring genes emerged when they bred together.’⁵
 - Second, Jacob might have been making an ironic, sarcastic statement to Laban. He makes the stronger livestock mate by seeing stripes of brown and white, producing striped and speckled flocks. There is a Hebrew word play on Laban’s name here. ‘Jacob took fresh rods of poplar [*libneh*] and almond and plane trees, and peeled white [*lebonot*] stripes in them, exposing the white [*laban*] which was in the rods.’ (30:37) He was exposing them to white [*laban*], but they were disadvantaging ‘Mr. White,’ Laban himself. Indeed, Laban’s sons (31:1) saw this and reported it to their father.
 - Third, God worked against Laban on Jacob’s behalf. God ensured that the animals would produce offspring in a certain way.

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p.416 – 417

² Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), p.255

³ Waltke, p.419

⁴ Waltke, p.420

⁵ Wenham, p.256

Questions

1. What can you tell about Jacob's initial stance, tone of voice? Is he the same trickster Jacob?
 - a. Jacob has to take the initiative to ask Laban to fulfill his promises. This is typical of their relationship!
 - b. He has the confidence ('you yourself know') of knowing what value he has given his father-in-law.
 - c. He put the work in first, after being tricked. He is now asking for what is fair.
2. What do you think about Laban's response in v.27 – 28?
 - a. He sounds slimy and sleazy.
 - b. He tries to get Jacob to stay longer, so that he can milk more service out of him.
 - c. He gives himself more credit than he really deserves ('I have divined...')
 - d. He wants to sound like the generous one. 'Name me your wages...' Earlier he had asked Jacob to name his wages and, following an agreement, had doubled Jacob's service. So now he must add that 'this time' he will follow through ('I will give it')
3. What do you think about Jacob's strategy?
 - a. He is choosing the less numerous and inferior animals. He is taking a handicap
4. And Laban's response?
 - a. Laban even removes the inferior animals
 - b. Fokkelman captures Laban's character: 'Laban, always on guard, safety-first his motto, is not deceived. Speaking in monosyllables, he is the big man, never committing himself... 'Oh well, let it be just as you have said.''⁶
 - c. But Laban succeeds at separating himself and his sons and his own flocks, leaving Jacob time to experiment.
5. Why does Jacob's scheme work?
 - a. Is it a genetic engineering experiment? Not really. It could be that there is something happening to make the animals mate more quickly, as noted in the cultural background notes. But primarily, it's God's working.
 - b. Jacob accepted a handicap, to care for Laban's interests. Like Rachel cared for Leah's interests in the previous passage. Jacob even removed the lambs from the flock. I presume that Jacob kept removing the spotted and striped lambs from the flock in order to keep Laban's flock separate, and increase the normal probability that Laban's flock would produce more sheep and goats of his color.
 - c. Later, Jacob reveals that God had told him a strategy in a dream (31:8 – 13) about Laban's betrayal and the workaround. In Jacob's speech we learn that Laban tried to change up the deal 10 times. That means that each time, God intervened to produce striped and/or spotted sheep and goats for Jacob. Jacob kept amassing a huge flock while Laban's flock stayed the same.
 - d. You can't beat the God of life in a game of life.
6. Is this poetic justice on Laban?
 - a. Is this poetic justice on Laban? It is a play on Laban's name! Jacob uses 'white' to defeat 'Mr. White' just like earlier he used a red stew to trick his 'red' brother. He beats 'Mr. White' at his own game.
 - b. So all the stronger, sturdier animals have white on them. This is a reversal of what Laban wants, and even how he would want to use his own name.
 - c. Earlier, Jacob tricked his father using goats. Now he tricks his uncle! So in that sense, Jacob
 - d. Also, Laban had tricked Jacob into taking Leah in addition to Rachel. Rachel was beautiful while Leah had 'weak eyes.' Now, Jacob tricks Laban into taking the weaker flocks. He's giving Laban a taste of his own medicine.
 - e. So now that Jacob is wealthy, he's ready to return home. No surprise that Laban is 'not friendly' anymore!
7. Does Jacob need to argue his case with Leah and Rachel?
 - a. He cannot take them without their consent – they had to be consulted. This was true with Rebekah as well, in Gen.24.
 - b. He might initially feel that he needs to win them over, but they are completely on board with him because they've seen enough.

⁶ J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), p.144

- c. We learn that Laban their father has cheated them too (31:15)! Their ‘purchase price’ was typically what the suitor gave the bride’s father, so he could give it to his daughter. Since the money passed through the bride’s father’s hands, it would ordinarily be hers without question, and would be unaffected by divorce. But Laban did not give them their ‘purchase price.’
 - d. Plus, Laban changed Jacob’s wages 10 times. He tried to unilaterally change the contract! Jacob’s scheme was narrated first, but then we learn that no matter what Laban did, God did the opposite. Jacob couldn’t beat Laban on his own. But Laban couldn’t beat the God of life in a game of life. Brian Morgan says, ‘Surprisingly, God allows Jacob the freedom to carry out his scheme, but then to be overcome and defeated by his adversary, and finally to be delivered by God. Only at the end of the story, after much reflection and a revelatory dream, does Jacob begin to understand the unique mystery of the sovereign God at work in his work. In the end, both competitors learn a hard lesson in ethics.’⁷ God was truly the one who was the author of life here.
 - e. Eventually, God will show that neither the devil nor humanity could stop God from raising Jesus from the dead, and raising believers in Jesus from spiritual death into eternal life.
 - i. Illus: The BC Asian Christian Fellowship transitioning from being not missional to being missional. They used to spend money given to them by the campus for a pizza night, for themselves. I asked them to use money to bless the campus instead of themselves. It was a turning point, though. The fellowship grew in both outreach, impact on campus, and discipleship.
 - ii. Illus: The Jesuits in the 1500’s onwards took great risks to reach the Chinese. But they discovered the Nestorian Stone, which dates back to 638 AD and describes millions of Chinese Christians, during the height of the Tang Dynasty, the Golden Age of China. The Chinese could no longer say that Christianity was an entirely foreign faith.
 - iii. (college context) Illus: a housing or blocking group decision where people seek to bless others through their housing decision.
 - iv. Application: How does the sin of one prepare others to side with God, and with you?
8. How has God shaped Jacob over these past twenty years?
- a. Jacob arrived in Haran nearly naked as a fugitive. Now he leaves prosperous.
 - b. Jacob has learned to become a ‘man of the field’ here, like Esau, and not just a ‘mama’s boy living in the tent’? He’s had to learn, over many years, the skills at caring for goats and sheep and other livestock. Abel was a shepherd as well, Noah cared for animals, and Abraham managed a large household. Jacob has had to learn how to care about life.
 - c. He’s been challenged, dealt with unreconciled conflict, had to confront his own inner emotions and sinful contribution to the situation at home, and stand up to his father-in-law.
 - d. He’s had to try his duplicity card, but Laban was a mirror to him of his own sin. He had to ultimately trust God to become a different person. And he had to want to become a different person. God didn’t want Jacob to just want to be better at trickery and manipulation than he was before, enough to beat Laban. God wanted Jacob to trust Him.
 - e. Jacob has become a very shrewd negotiator in an unfriendly world. He cannot rely on his mother to intervene for him.
 - f. God is preparing Jacob to be the husband and father God wants him to be. A protector, provider, teacher.
 - g. Illus: This reminds me of the Disney movie Aladdin. Aladdin grows up in a hard world. But he had to learn to have integrity, compassion, and most of all, honesty.
 - h. Illus: personal story

⁷ Brian Morgan, ‘Work, at What Price?’ (<http://www.pbcc.org/sermons/media/1428.html>)