

## **Genesis 31:1-21**

### **Jacob Flees**

Jacob and his uncle were used to coming to terms, and then modifying those terms as opportunity came to gain advantage. First, the object of their arrangement had been Jacob's first wife. Jacob had presumed it would be Rachel, but Laban took advantage of local custom to marry off his elder, and less attractive, daughter Leah instead. Having been taken thus exploited, Jacob had little choice but to agree to work another seven years for the wife he wanted.

And again, after living for many years among his relatives in Paddan-aram, Jacob and his uncle, Laban, had made another agreement. Jacob would "pass through your [his uncle Laban's] 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" (Genesis 30:32). But while both Jacob and his uncle had agreed to this arrangement, each had formulated a plan to manipulate the other.

To begin, Laban "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. <sup>36</sup>And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob" (Genesis 30:35-36). Not to be outdone, and taking advantage of the privacy afforded to him by Laban's treachery, 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. <sup>38</sup>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. <sup>39</sup>So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted" (Genesis 30:37-39).

Thus the two men jousted, while God worked out His sovereign plan. God had promised to bless Jacob, as he had his father, Isaac, and his grandfather, Abraham. God promised His presence and His protection, as well as land, seed, and blessing. Each of these patriarchs, in turn had been chosen by God to serve as the conduit of the Lord's determination to bring forth salvation to those whom He had chosen.

### **Jacob is Commanded to Leave**

So, over the years, Jacob "became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys" (Genesis 30:43). Such success had not gone unnoticed by the envious sons of Laban, who happened to also be Jacob's cousins. They had played a part in their father's deception of Jacob when they removed some of the flocks and herds that had been pledged to Jacob. Yet, despite living at a good distance, three day's journey might be fifty miles or so, they had become aware of Jacob's prosperity. And Jacob had heard of it. "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'" (v. 1).

While Jacob undoubtedly did not agree with their assessment of the situation, he could not be ignorant of the ramifications of such jealous feelings. Fourteen years of living with Leah and Rachel (not to mention Bilhah and Zilah) must have given Jacob many lessons in the bitterness that ensued from family rivalry.

Where once they had shared a home, now Laban's sons were bitter toward their more fortunate cousin. We can recall that Jacob had arrived in Paddan-aram with virtually nothing. So impoverished was he that he had even had to work for seven years to earn the dowry for his wife. Since then he had served another seven years for the wife he loved, Rachel, and another several years overseeing Laban's flocks and herds. Despite his initial low station, he had flourished, and now Jacob was richer than they. The concern of these men was that their father's entire patrimony would go to their foreign cousin. They realized that the increase of Jacob's holdings could only come at their expense.

Laban, too, had come to regret the alliance with Jacob. "Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly" (v. 2). Clearly his uncle, as well, had grown weary of Jacob, despite the prosperity that Jacob had brought with him. Laban had tried to take advantage of his nephew and, in fact, had done so. Yet, Jacob still prospered. Though Laban acknowledged that the God of Jacob had blessed both Jacob and himself (Genesis 30:27), his envy got the better of him, and he became jealous of Jacob.

But, despite the animosity of both his cousins and his uncle, Scripture makes it plain that it was not fear of man that drove Jacob back to Canaan. Jacob left for Canaan because the Lord commanded him to do so. If verses one and two of the narrative give the human perspective on Jacob's flight, verse three gives the divine perspective. "Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you'" (v. 3). The command was straightforward and, while God gave no reason for wanting Jacob to leave at this time, God did renew the promise of His presence along the way. As He had done on the outward journey to Paddan-aram (Genesis 28:15), so now the Lord assured Jacob that he would be accompanied by his God on the return trip as well. As prosperous as Jacob might have become in Paddan-aram, like his grandfather Abraham before him, he would gain far more than he had if he obeyed God and left for Canaan.

### **Jacob Appeals to His Wives**

Armed with the security that he was obeying the Lord, Jacob gave vent to his feelings as he told his family it was time to depart. He was seeking the endorsement of his wives (the narrative makes no mention of Bilhah and Zilpah, though mothers of Jacob's sons they are servants and will go where they are told). So, Jacob recounted past events as he chose to remember them,

"<sup>4</sup>Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>You know that I have served your father with all my strength. <sup>7</sup>Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me (v. 4-9).

Notice first that this conversation occurred in the fields, away from any who might overhear. As confident as Jacob may have sounded when expressing his feelings to his wives, he did not necessarily want any family or friends of Laban to overhear him. Jacob also focused on Laban, rather than his sons. The problem lay entirely with him, according to Jacob. He alone was to blame. In his well-reasoned

presentation, Jacob articulated three main points to Rachel and Leah. First, he pointed out that Laban's demeanor toward him had changed. That must have been obvious to Rachel and Leah, as no doubt they, too, had witnessed Laban's actions and attitude. Then Jacob asserted that he had served their father diligently. He had not been delinquent in performing his duty. He had done nothing to provoke Laban's change of heart toward him. Again, this was something that would have been evident to his wives. They had seen him work the fields and flocks for two decades.

Jacob then pointed out that Laban had not acted in good faith toward him, though certainly he was exaggerating when he claimed that his wages had been changed ten times. His wives also were probably aware of this as well. Certainly they were aware of the confusion surrounding Jacob's first wedding night. Finally, Jacob acknowledged that his prosperity was the work of God. Whatever Jacob may have once believed about his genetically modified breeding program, time had given him the perspective, it sees, that he understood that it was God Who had been at work. We can only hope that Rachel and Leah shared his perspective in this as well.

Throughout Jacob's plea, he sought to denote the difference between himself and Laban. To his wives, Laban was referred to as "your father" frequently (v. 5, 6, 7, 9), which was juxtaposed with "the God of my father" (v. 5, 7, 9). Jacob also appealed to the fact that his wives were very much aware of the truth of all that he was saying (v. 6). Yet, throughout Jacob's entire speech, one cannot fail to observe the emphasis on Jacob's understanding that it was God Who was at work all the time. It was God Who had been with Jacob (v. 5). It was God Who had protected him (v. 7) And it was God Who had allowed Jacob to prosper (v. 9).

Having expressed his feelings to his wives, Jacob then recounted his dream. His hope, here, was to reinforce his logical argument with a divine mandate.

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'here I am.' <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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'" (v. 10-13).

In this vision, Jacob was commanded to do three things. First, he was told to "lift up now your eyes" (v. 12). That is, God wanted Jacob to see that God had provided for him despite the treatment he had been receiving from Laban. The Lord then reminded Jacob that He was the same God Who had appeared to him before, during his night at Bethel, where, the Lord recalled to Jacob, that Jacob had made a vow to Him. Then, God gave Jacob the final two commands. The first was to 'arise' and the second was to "leave this land and return" to Canaan (v. 13). These were straightforward, clear, unmistakable directives from the Lord God.

Such dreams were a frequent occurrence within the patriarchal narratives. We can recall that Abraham (Genesis 15:12-16), the Philistine, Abimelech (Genesis 20:3), and Jacob, himself (Genesis 28:12), all had

received visions from God. The language used here, also, is reminiscent of other Old Testament passages. Jacob “lifted up [his] eyes” (v. 10) as Abraham had done (Genesis 13:14, 18:2). The call of the Lord and Jacob’s response, “here I am” (v. 11) bring to mind that of Abraham and the command to journey to the mountains of Moriah (Genesis 22:1). The identification of the Lord as the “God of Bethel” (v. 13) brings the reader back to Jacob’s original vision at that place. But notice that then, the Lord had identified Himself as the “God of you father, Abraham and the God of Isaac” (Genesis 28:13). Now the Lord was referring to Himself in a way that helped Jacob understand that He was truly his God as well. Jacob has his own personal relationship with God. Yahweh is now the God of Jacob as well.

Jacob then used his vision to explain to his wives two things. First, that God had agreed with Jacob’s understanding of his mistreatment. The Lord had “seen all that Laban has been doing to you” (v. 12). Second, Jacob used the dream as God’s endorsement of the plan to leave Paddan-aram (v. 13). Indeed, the language gives a sense of urgency. The staccato-like commands of “arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth” (v. 13) punctuate the vision.

There was also humility in this speech, though, since now Jacob was admitting to his wives that it was not his own skill and intelligence that had been the source of his accumulated wealth and possessions, but that it was God Who had been looking out for him all along. It may be that Jacob believed that he was asking too much of his wives, to leave their family and their home, and if he emphasized that he was commanded to do so by the God Who had been blessing them all along, his argument would be more persuasive.

### **Rachel and Leah Respond**

He need not have worried. His wives, it seemed, were ready to go, and they had reasons of their own for wanting to leave. <sup>14</sup>“Rachel and Leah said to him, ‘do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father’s house? <sup>15</sup>Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. <sup>16</sup>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’” (v. 14-16). Apparently, they did not need to hear about the hardships their father had inflicted on their husband. For Rachel and Leah, it was enough to simply recall the difficulties he had placed on them.

Some historical context is necessary to understand the complaint of Rachel and Leah. They claimed that their father “has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price” (v. 15). This could refer to the practice in many ancient Mesopotamian societies that the money given to the father as a dowry reverted to the daughter when she came of age. The purpose of this custom was to protect the young bride against insolvency in case her husband died while she was still young or abandoned her. The money would serve both to keep her from destitution, as well as be an incentive to a new husband, who could marry her and thus combine her wealth with his own.

But since Jacob had paid for both Leah and Rachel not with money or livestock but with time of service, Rachel and Leah may have felt that their father should have given them the equivalency in some more tangible assets. And adding insult to injury, whatever Laban had acquired through the work of Jacob he had wasted. Thus their father had wrongfully kept from his daughters the price of their wedding vows.

### **The Flight from Paddan-aram**

No doubt relieved that he would not have to persuade his wives to leave, Jacob began to make preparations for the two-month long, five hundred mile journey to Canaan. “<sup>17</sup>Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; <sup>18</sup>and he drove away all his livestock and all his property which he had gathered, his acquired livestock which he had gathered in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac” (v. 17-18). The language used by the writer emphasized that these animals were not those Jacob had swindled from Laban, but rather those animals he had obtained in the ensuing years by legitimate means.

Jacob had become wealthy. And like Abraham, he now had to pack up the entirety of his belongings and prepare for the long journey from Paddan-aram to Canaan. It is interesting to think that some of the wealth that Abraham had left behind when he left Haran so many years ago, was now returning with his grandson to Canaan.

His flocks and herds had been gathered, and his wives were packed and ready to leave. But ever cunning, Jacob waited until “Laban had gone to shear his flock” (v. 19). In other words, Jacob was making his departure without telling Laban. He had no intention of being cajoled into further years of service by his duplicitous uncle.

When Laban and his sons departed to shear their flocks, then Jacob and his family left. But not before Rachel, unbeknownst apparently, to either Jacob or Leah, and in a glaring act of spite, “stole the household idols that were her father’s” (v. 19). We must pause to enjoy the narrative commentary the Hebrew author was clearly making. Who are these gods that can so easily be stolen? Is the fate of these pagan gods determined simply by the hateful acts of a deceitful woman? To the Israelites, whose God was the incomprehensible “I Am,” such mockery must have been very amusing.

So, Laban was away shearing his flock. That was an event that occurred in about April or May, and it was usually a festive occasion where family and friends would join in both the work and in celebration. The shearing of the flock was done in outlying areas, that is the sheep were sheared where they pastured and were not necessarily brought in to inhabited areas. Thus, Laban and his sons, and also whatever hired men he had at his disposal, were away from the main residence, and this afforded Jacob and Rachel the privacy necessary to both steal away and to steal.

The gods Rachel stole were called *tērāpîm* and are not easily identifiable. Because Rachel was able to hide them under her saddle when Laban caught up with the fugitives (Genesis 31:34), they were evidently small, portable figurines. These *tērāpîm* could, however, also be lifesize. Centuries later, during the time of King David, we read that,

“<sup>13</sup>Michal took the household idol and laid it on the bed, and put a quilt of goats’ hair at its head, and covered it with clothes. <sup>14</sup>When Saul sent messengers to take David, she said, ‘he is sick.’ <sup>15</sup>Then Saul sent messengers to see David, saying, ‘bring him up to me on his bed, that I may put him to death.’ <sup>16</sup>When the messengers entered, behold, the household idol was on the bed with the quilt of goats’ hair at its head” (1 Samuel 19:13-16).

These gods were not associated with any particular place of worship. That is, they were not primarily temple gods, but instead were Laban's own personal possession. Such gods could be used by pagans for divination, an art we know that Laban practiced (Genesis 30:27). Perhaps the best modern equivalent of these *tērāpîm* might be the icons used by those in Eastern Orthodox religions or the statues used by Roman Catholics, though it must be observed that neither of these modern-day objects are seen by their adherents as gods in the sense Laban understood. These contemporary examples are merely objects of veneration, and not objects themselves to be worshipped.

One might wonder at Rachel's motive for pilfering her father's personal deities. As already mentioned, it may merely have been spite. Her actions may simply reflect nothing more than Rachel wanting to do something to aggravate her father, and stealing his gods while he was out working with the flocks was easy and uncomplicated. Remember that she, and her sister, had felt ill-used by their father, and this moment may have seemed like an opportune time for revenge. They were leaving Paddan-aram forever, and their father was a long way off. After all, she may have reasoned, her father had withheld her rightful dowry, so now she would take his gods.

Other explanations for Rachel's behavior are also possible. It might be suggested that Rachel merely wanted to turn a profit on her departure, and she took the gods to sell them somewhere along the way. Such family gods were often made of precious metals such as silver or gold. Another line of reasoning would be to point to the fact that it was understood among some Mesopotamian cultures that the possession of the family gods entitled the possessor to be head of the family and hold title to all the family property. That is, Rachel's primary motivation would have been to ensure that Jacob, rather than her brothers, succeeded her father and came into ownership of the family's wealth. But we must see that this explanation seems unlikely, since Jacob and the family were leaving for Canaan. How could Jacob possibly press his claim from such a distance?

Another related argument is that Rachel stole the gods to give her son, Joseph, priority over Leah's sons. That is to say, Rachel did not steal the gods for her husband, but for her son. This particular argument has the same problem, though, as stealing the gods for Jacob. Joseph had no more likelihood of returning to Paddan-aram than did his father. A more prosaic explanation, but perhaps more likely, is that Rachel, perhaps still remembering her pagan upbringing, stole the gods to provide the family protection on their long, and potentially hazardous, journey.

Whatever Rachel's motivation, and ultimately Scripture offers us no clue, Jacob and the family, and Laban's gods, left for Canaan. <sup>20</sup>“Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. <sup>21</sup>So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead” (v. 20-21). It is interesting that the narrator passed judgment on Jacob's actions. He had ‘deceived’ his father-in-law by leaving without informing him in advance.

### **Takeaways**

Thus Jacob had fled to Paddan-aram, and now he fled from it. His life of deception caused family strife in both places. Yet God was still at work and the promises of land, seed, and blessing endured. Such is the God we serve.