

Genesis 31:22-55

Jacob and Laban Reach an Agreement

God had told Jacob it was time to come home. All the wealth he had gained in Paddan-aram was nothing to what awaited him if only he would obey and “return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives” (Genesis 31:3). And the timing could not have been better from Jacob’s perspective, for both his uncle Laban and Laban’s sons had begun to resent Jacob’s increasing prosperity. So, Jacob nervously told his wives, Rachel and Leah, of his plans.

Fortunately for Jacob, both of his wives had grown equally dissatisfied with life in their homeland and were more than willing to go with Jacob to Canaan. So, early one morning, ¹⁷Jacob arose and put his children and his wives upon camels; ¹⁸and 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” (Genesis 31:17-18). His uncle and the rest of the family journeyed gone to shear the flock, so Jacob was able to make his escape easily. But unbeknown to him, Rachel had complicated this already tense situation by vindictively taking it upon herself to steal her father’s household gods.

So, Jacob had deceived Laban by leaving without telling him, and Rachel had deceived Laban by stealing his household idols. And so the entire extended family, including Jacob’s wives, probably the servants Bilhah and Zilpah as well as others, eleven sons, and at least one daughter, not to mention what may have been hundreds of sheep, goats, camels, and donkeys (Genesis 30:43), began their way on the arduous trek from Paddan-aram to Canaan.

Laban Pursues Jacob

When Jacob and his family left, they were clearly a large party. So, though they were able to leave while Laban and his sons were away, they could not possibly have hoped to leave secretly. So it should not surprise us that a loyal servant must have departed immediately to inform Laban. Fortunately for Jacob and his party, since Laban and his sons were shearing the sheep at a three-day’s distance from the main habitation (Genesis 30:36), it took some time. But when he heard the news, Laban responded with urgency. ²²When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, ²³then he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him a distance of seven days’ journey, and he overtook him in the hill country of Gilead” (v. 22-23).

This particular detail requires some explanation. The distance (a best estimate) from Paddan-aram to Gilead is about 350 miles. That was a significant distance for Jacob’s party to travel in only ten days, but perhaps it can be explained by the fact that while Scripture states that it took the servant three days to find Laban, and that Laban pursued Jacob for seven days, it is possible that there was an interval between the time Laban heard the news and then left in pursuit of his quarry. After all, it seems unlikely that Laban would simply stop in the middle of the process of shearing the sheep and leave. That Laban “took his kinsmen” meant that there must have been some time to assemble the men, acquire provisions for the journey, and delegate others to finish the important task of shearing. This may have been no more than a few days or a week, but it might have allowed for enough time for Jacob to travel to Gilead.

On the other hand, it is also possible that these time frames are not to be taken literally, and are, rather, formulaic expressions. For a caravan of people and animals to move at about ten miles a day was typical for the time period. Thus it usually took about two months to cover the distance from Paddan-aram to Canaan. Since Gilead was located at the northern edge of Canaan, to have traveled there in only two or three weeks would have been an exceptional (but not impossible) pace for Jacob to have moved.

In any case, when he did leave, Laban took his men with him. This reminds the reader of Abraham's pursuit of the four invading kings who had captured Lot (Genesis 14:14). But, in this situation, God had not authorized the mission. In fact, "God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, 'be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad'" (v. 24). Note that God did not expressly forbid Laban from pursuing Jacob, rather Laban was simply not permitted to confront him when they met. We will soon see that that injunction was largely ignored. Laban continued in his chase and, when he encountered Jacob, he accosted him brazenly.

Traveling much more quickly without the burden of many flocks and herds, and we must also remember that, while Jacob was anxious to leave Paddan-aram, he was undoubtedly in no hurry to meet his brother Esau, Laban eventually caught up with his target. "Laban caught up with Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen camped in the hill country of Gilead" (v. 25). Thus each party took up defensible positions in the Gilead high country, preparing for a dramatic, and perhaps military, encounter. How long the two parties stared across at each other we do not know, but Laban was the first to speak.

²⁶Laban said to Jacob, 'what have you done by deceiving me and carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷Why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so that I might have sent you away with joy and with songs, with timbrel and with lyre; ²⁸and did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters? Now you have done foolishly. ²⁹It is in my power to do you harm, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, "be careful not to speak either good or bad to Jacob." ³⁰Now you have indeed gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods?" (v. 26-30).

Laban considered himself in the role of paterfamilias. That is, he believed that he was responsible for, and in authority over, all those in the family, including sons-in-law and their offspring and servants. As such, he made his accusations with force, even though he had been proscribed this by God. He began his diatribe with the question "what have you done?" which ironically reminds the reader of the same question Jacob had asked Laban when he awoke to find Leah in his bridal tent instead of Rachel (Genesis 29:25).

Laban first accused Jacob of "carrying away my daughters like captives of the sword" (v. 26). To emphasize the offense, notice that Laban even referred to Rachel and Leah as his daughters, rather than as Jacob's wives. Yet as we know, that was hardly a true representation of the facts (Genesis 31:14-16). The women had been quite willing conspirators in the plan to leave their homeland. The second complaint of Laban was that Jacob had left without informing him, "why did you flee secretly and deceive me, and did not tell me so" (v. 27). Surely Laban must have been aware of his own actions in detaining Jacob for several years. His eagerness to have given a great celebration for the departing family

fooled no one. One can hardly imagine Laban throwing a “bon voyage” party for Jacob and his family. Laban may have been frustrated that Jacob had left secretly, but he certainly could not have been surprised.

Laban was condescending. He belittled his adversary. Laban pointed out to Jacob that “you have done foolishly” (v. 28). And then he emphasized his power over Jacob, as well as telling Jacob that he was kept from using that power only because of the prohibition God had placed on him. Jacob may have thought Laban was bluffing here, though we know that Laban did faithfully reproduce God’s words to him regarding Jacob. And Jacob must have seen that he was outnumbered in any battle that might have ensued. That is to say, it is likely that Laban’s forces could have forcibly taken Rachel and Leah back to Paddan-aram had they chosen to do so. But in this case, Laban heeded the words of Jacob’s God.

Laban concluded by conceding that Jacob’s desire to return home was natural, though he may have simply been patronizing Jacob here as well. Finally, Laban ended his speech with the accusation of stealing, “why did you steal my gods?” (v. 30). This last point, it turned out, was the more significant for Laban. And it must have startled Jacob, who was unaware of what Rachel had done. Laban, too, did not suspect his daughter; the accusation was leveled directly at Jacob, not to members of his household. Laban knew Jacob’s character at least well enough to assume he might be capable of stealing his gods.

Finally given an opportunity to respond, Jacob offered a quick, and truthful, explanation for his actions. He did not deny the obvious charges that he had left precipitously, but rather he offered a very reasonable explanation. “Jacob replied to Laban, ‘because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force’” (v. 31). Since Laban had pursued Jacob with his entourage of men, and since he had straightforwardly announced that it was within his power to do Jacob and his family harm, Laban could hardly have been expected to deny this possibility. Jacob had acted out of fear and, as we have seen, fear has been a motivating factor for human behavior since the beginning.

“⁸They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

⁹Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘where are you?’ ¹⁰He said, ‘I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself’”

(Genesis 3:8-10).

Then, thinking that Laban was merely posturing, Jacob boldly refuted the charge of theft. “³²The one with whom you find your gods shall not live; in the presence of our kinsmen point out what is yours among my belongings and take it for yourself. For Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them” (v. 32). Jacob not only denied stealing Laban’s gods, but he insisted that he and his party had not stolen anything at all that had belonged to Laban. Jacob boldly gave Laban the right to search through all of the possessions in his caravan and point out what had been taken wrongly. This would have included even the flocks and herds. Thus Jacob was tacitly proclaiming his rightful possession of all the multi-colored animals that Laban and his sons argued had been taken from them.

But Jacob had spoken rashly. The oath that whoever had stolen the gods would receive the death penalty was an emphatic assertion of innocence. It was like the claim of Joseph’s brothers regarding his cup,

which like Jacob, they did not believe was in the possession of anyone in their party (Genesis 44:9). Interestingly, some scholars have used this passage to claim that the death penalty was the legal consequence for stealing in this culture at that time, though drawing such a conclusion from what might very well have simply been a rash statement is precarious.

Given permission Laban, himself, began to search. “Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two maids, but he did not find them. Then he went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s tent” (v. 33). He looked thoroughly, but in all the wrong places. He began with Jacob, of course, but then worked his way around the camp. That he eventually searched the tents of his daughters indicated that Laban did not believe them to be entirely innocent parties to Jacob’s flight.

Finally, he made his way to Rachel’s tent. But “³⁴Rachel had taken the household idols and put them in the camel’s saddle, and she sat on them. And Laban felt through all the tent but did not find them. ³⁵She said to her father, ‘let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the manner of women is upon me.’ So he searched but did not find the household idols” (v. 34-35). Again we can feel the glee with which the Hebrew author described these ‘gods’ who could be hidden in a saddle pack. And that saddle was for use on a camel, itself an unclean animal (Leviticus 11:4). Not only could these pagan gods be stolen, but they could even be sat upon and rendered unclean by their association with Rachel’s menstrual cycle (Leviticus 15:19-33).

And we can also see that Rachel had acquired some of her husband's ability to deceive. She knew full well that her father would respect her physical condition and not challenge her. She tricked her father in a way that would have made her husband proud. Finally, we can enjoy the author’s implication that while Laban had searched for these worthless gods, he was kept from finding them by the Almighty God of Jacob.

Jacob’s Defense

As Laban came sheepishly back from Rachel’s tent empty-handed, Jacob launched into his apologia. He believed himself to have been wrongly accused, and he was eager to point out that injustice. Jacob defended himself forcefully as he unleashed twenty years of frustration.

“³⁶Jacob became angry and contended with Laban; and Jacob said to Laban, ‘what is my transgression? What is my sin that you have hotly pursued me? ³⁷Though you have felt through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. ³⁸These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. ³⁹That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. ⁴¹These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, and you changed my wages ten times. ⁴²If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God has seen my affliction and the toil of my hands, so He rendered judgment last night” (v. 36-42).

Jacob engaged in the same exaggeration and rhetorical devices that his father-in-law had used. Such was the emotion of the moment and the years of pent up resentment. Jacob first challenged Laban to identify his sin, “what is my transgression? What is my sin?” he boldly asked, seeing that Laban had returned without finding the missing idols (v. 36). Then Jacob called others to bear witness to Laban’s treatment of him, “what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two” (v. 37). In this case, Jacob was appealing to a third party and making the dispute between himself and Laban a legal matter beyond the reconciliation of the two parties involved. That was unusual since, like the difficulties between the herdsman of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13:7-8), or that between Isaac and the men of Gerar (Genesis 26:20-22), there was generally no recourse to a third party to resolve a dispute. Moreover, notice that Jacob was distancing himself from Laban’s family. Now there are “my kinsmen” and “your kinsmen” though clearly the two families were related.

Jacob then gave his account of their history together. He argued that had served Laban faithfully. He complained that he had suffered under the elements of heat and cold. He pointed out that he had lost sleep due both to the elements and the need to protect the flocks and herds. He reminded Laban that he had made restitution from his own possessions for any animals that had been lost to predators, though this was not necessarily required and would eventually be codified into law (Exodus 22: 12-13, also the Code of Hammurabi #266). He explained in no uncertain terms that he had been above reproach in all his dealings with Laban. At least that was according to Jacob’s version of the past.

Sadly, we can see that Jacob’s perspective of time had also changed. At first, “Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.” (Genesis 29:20). But now, it seemed that Jacob could recall every hour of the twenty years he had labored under Laban’s harsh countenance. Lastly, we must applaud Jacob for remembering to give credit to God for His protection. “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had not been for me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed” (v. 42). Jacob acknowledged the role God had played in sustaining him. God had kept His promises, as He had done to the other patriarchs.

The Covenant between Jacob and Laban

Each man having made his point to the other, as well as to all those who may have been in attendance, Laban and Jacob determined to resolve their differences. But first, Laban fired one last salvo at Jacob. “Laban replied to Jacob, ‘the daughters are my daughters, and the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne?’” (v. 43). This was nothing more than a pathetic attempt to save face. Laban insisted that Jacob had turned his own family against him. This claim was both excessive and false. It was a direct challenge to the reality pointed out in both Jacob’s assertion, “thus God has taken away your father’s livestock and given them to me” (Genesis 31:9) and that of Rachel and Leah, “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” (Genesis 31:16).

Having entitled himself to the last word, it was Laban who proposed the treaty, “so now come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me” (v. 44). He may have been trying to assert one last time his authority over Jacob by taking the initiative. Regardless of his hidden motives, his proposition was twofold. First, he and Jacob would make a covenant, that is, a formal declaration in writing of their commitments to each other. In addition, Laban made reference to a ‘witness’ (v. 52). This second component was to be a permanent physical reminder of the written document, which might be easily lost or destroyed. These two elements were designed to complement each other.

Jacob did not respond to Laban’s offer with words, but with actions. ⁴⁵“Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶Jacob said to his kinsmen, ‘gather stones.’ So they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap” (v. 45-46). Jacob spoke only to those of his own party as he put them to work building the monument. It is clear that Jacob undertook two different building programs. First, he, himself, erected a single stone pillar. This was similar to the one he built after his first encounter with God at Bethel (Genesis 28:18). It was to serve as a personal reminder of the moment. The second structure was built by Jacob’s kinsmen and was a group of stones formed into a mound shape to serve as a reminder of the covenant itself.

Once the mound was erected, Laban gave a speech.

⁴⁷“Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. ⁴⁸Laban said, ‘this heap is a witness between you and me this day.’ Therefore it was named Galeed, ⁴⁹and Mizpah, for he said, ‘may the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other. ⁵⁰If you mistreat my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.’ ⁵¹Laban said to Jacob, ‘behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me. ⁵²This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass by this heap to you for harm, and you will not pass by this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. ⁵³The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us” (v. 47-53).

Laban named the site in his own, Aramaic, language. It is the writer who inserted the name Galeed, probably given by Jacob, as it was a Hebrew term. The point of the narrative here is that both sides clearly understood in their own terms the significance of what was being done here. This was very common in the ancient world, even as it is today, when people of different languages form alliances or make treaties.

We also discover here Laban’s true motives for the pact. He was concerned about how his daughters would be treated now that they were separated from his care and supervision. Though he still referred to Rachel and Leah as his daughters rather than as Jacob’s wives (it seems he could never bring himself to do this), Laban insisted that Jacob take no more wives into his household. The prohibition against taking additional wives was not uncommon in marriage pacts, though it was a bit late for such a prohibition in this case. In fact, Laban may merely have been trying to preserve his own branch of the family tree in the increasingly prosperous line of Jacob.

Interestingly, Laban invoked Jacob's God as his witness. The use of God to adjudicate a treaty was to become commonplace among the Israelites eventually (Deuteronomy 28:20, 22, 45), but here it was a pagan who was invoking the name of the Lord. Laban must have clearly understood that using his own gods as vindicators of justice would have been foolish on two accounts. First, Laban had no reason to think Jacob believed in those gods and second, Laban still had not yet found his missing deities.

To the end, Laban presented himself as the more dominant of the two men. Even though he had watched Jacob's men build the pillar, he insisted that he had been the architect, "Behold this heap and behold the pillar which I have set between you and me" (v. 51). How much of this pontificating Jacob, not to mention Rachel and Leah, took seriously Scripture does not say.

If Laban was concerned about how Jacob might treat his daughters in the future, he was equally distressed over how Jacob might treat him. And, again, he appealed to Jacob's God to be the judge. The result was a typical non-aggression pact of the ancient world, often formed between relatively equal, and unfriendly, parties in the ancient world. We can recall a similar agreement reached between Abimelech and Isaac when the two quarreled over water rights in the region where they lived (Genesis 26:28-29). In this case, though, we might note that Laban was more concerned about Jacob than Jacob was about Laban. It was only Jacob who is recorded as swearing the oath, "so Jacob swore by the fear of his father Isaac" (v. 53). Either Laban's offer of the treaty was enough to satisfy Jacob that Laban was obligated to keep its arrangements, or perhaps Jacob was simply eager to be rid of Laban and get on his way. We do not know for certain. Since Scripture is silent, we are left to speculate.

Having sworn the oath, "then Jacob offered a sacrifice on the mountain, and called his kinsmen to the meal; and they ate the meal and spent the night on the mountain" (v. 54). While the sharing of a meal between the two parties was a frequent conclusion to reaching an agreement (Genesis 24:54), it seems that in this case Jacob and his kinsmen ate without inviting Laban and his men to the feast. Again, we do not know Jacob's motives. Perhaps he did not trust Laban. Perhaps he was simply tired of his company after twenty years. We can note that since Jacob offered a sacrifice, that meant that the animals eaten at the meal were those animals offered for slaughter. Again, this was an ancient way of literally incorporating into the body the elements of the covenant.

The covenant concluded, "early in the morning Laban arose, and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned to his place" (v. 55). Laban kissed his sons (grandsons) and daughters, but not Jacob. This was a stark contrast to their first meeting, "when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house" (Genesis 29:13). Such bitterness was the sad, but inevitable, consequence of twenty years of deceit.

Takeaways

Once again we can see God working His perfect, sovereign will through the actions of sinful men and women. Once again we can see God faithful to Himself, as He protected Jacob and continued to fulfill His promises to the chosen line of Abraham. Once again we have cause for praise and thanksgiving, as we know He works the same in us.