

### **Genesis 30:25-43**

#### **Jacob's Prosperity**

It had been a very long time since “Isaac sent Jacob away, and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau” (Genesis 28:5). And not only had it been a long time, but much had happened. Indeed, after arriving there, Jacob had met and fallen in love with Rachel. Unfortunately, the impoverished Jacob had been compelled to work seven years to win her hand, as he had no dowry. Upon finishing his required time, Jacob asked for his wife. A wedding feast was held, but in the morning Jacob discovered, both to his amazement and his chagrin, that beside him lay Leah, the elder sister, and not Rachel whom he loved. Compelled to work another seven years for the wife he did want, Jacob labored for his duplicitous uncle, though at least, now, he had Rachel by his side.

It was then that Jacob began to father many sons. First, his wife Leah bore him four sons in succession, likely during the seven year period while Jacob was working for Rachel. Rachel had been unable to bear children, so to compete with her less attractive, but more fertile sister, she offered Jacob her servant, Bilhah, in the hopes that Bilhah might bear a child in her name. And so Bilhah did, not once but twice. Then Leah, seeking to maintain her position as the most fruitful of Jacob's wives, offered Jacob her servant, Zilpah. And Zilpah, too, bore Jacob two sons.

Still hoping to make merit Jacob's affection, Leah then bartered away some flowers with presumed aphrodisiac qualities in exchange for a night with Jacob, and Leah bore Jacob a fifth son. And later she bore Jacob a sixth son, though no number of sons, it seemed, would be enough to induce Jacob to love her more than Rachel. After these many years, the Lord remembered Rachel, and allowed her to be fruitful as well. The social stigma of barrenness was removed as Rachel bore Jacob the son, Joseph, through whom the true family line would one day pass. Thus with eleven living sons, and at least one daughter, Jacob had spent his years in Paddan-aram, working for his uncle Laban. But years had passed, probably fourteen years now, and Jacob was ready to return home.

#### **Jacob and Laban Reach an Agreement**

It might seem that the motivation for Jacob to return had been the birth of Joseph. Now that Jacob had a son by the wife he loved, he wanted to return to his own land of Canaan. It may very well have been that Jacob did not want to return to his family with a barren wife. Having chosen a woman to be his wife who could not bear children would have been viewed as a great error in judgment on Jacob's part. The promises of land, seed, and blessing, hinged on the second of these, that of seed. Without numerous progeny, how could the descendants of Abraham possibly subdue the promised land of Canaan. And if their line died out, how could they be a source of blessing to the whole world? But now, with baby Joseph in hand, Jacob was eager to depart.

But the text also implies that Jacob had finished serving the required seven years to complete the dowry for Rachel. He had shown integrity by not leaving when he took in Rachel as his wife, one week in to that seven year period. Though Rachel had joined him as his wife, Jacob remained to serve the full seven

years of his commitment to his uncle. He could have stolen away in the night with his family, but he did not.

Now, however, Jacob made his wishes clear to his uncle, who we must remember was also the father of Jacob's two wives, Rachel and Leah. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>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'" (v. 25-26). Jacob did not simply leave, nor did he inform Laban that he was leaving. In fact, Jacob asked permission to leave.

Despite his integrity and decorum, Jacob's language implied a release from duty. It was the same wording later codified into the law, describing how a relative who had needed to sell himself into temporary slavery should be treated upon their release (Deuteronomy 15:12). Also we can see that even after fourteen years, Laban's home was not Jacob's home. It was not his country. Laban lived in Paddan-aram, and Jacob knew that he had been promised the land of Canaan. We do not know for certain exactly what Jacob meant by "my own country" (v. 25). He may even have been referring specifically to Bethel, where he had encountered the Lord so many years ago (Genesis 28:13-16).

Lastly, we can also see that Jacob wanted his wives and children, but he asked for only his wives and children. He did not ask for wages, or some sort of departing gift from his twice father-in-law. Jacob understood that he had worked for the privilege of marrying Laban's two daughters, though he would have been quite satisfied with only marrying Rachel. Still, a deal was a deal, and Jacob had fulfilled his part of the bargain. Now he wanted to go.

But Laban was not so eager to see his son-in-law depart. Laban had done well while Jacob had served him, and it seemed that Laban recognized that Jacob had no small role in that success. "Laban said to him, 'if now it pleases you, stay with me; I have divined that the Lord has blessed me on your account'" (v. 27). Laban acknowledged that Jacob, or perhaps more accurately, Jacob's God, had been the source of his prosperity. Still, we cannot miss that Laban, as well as Jacob, was a skilled negotiator. Laban's response to Jacob was a combination of evasiveness and flattery. He did not directly say no to Jacob, nor did he give Jacob his wives and children. Instead he made a counteroffer, enclosed in praise for Jacob and his God.

The language Laban employed was of a set type, often used when one party wanted to make a request of another party, especially if the first party wanted to acknowledge that the second party was a superior. The "if now it pleases you" was the equivalent of "if I have found favor in your eyes" that was used by Abraham when he greeted his heavenly visitors (Genesis 18:3) and as Jacob, himself, would use when he met Esau on his return home (Genesis 33:10). Laban no longer had power over Jacob, so he was compelled to couch his desire as a request rather than as a demand.

From our perspective, we can see Laban's acknowledgement of his success as attributable to the God of Jacob was yet another fulfillment of the divine promise made to Abraham when he left Haran for Canaan. Then the Lord had promised to "bless those who bless you" (Genesis 12:3), and though one might argue

that Laban had done little to actually bless Jacob, we must accept the fact that he had both taken him in and allowed Jacob to marry his daughters.

Laban could have recognized his own prosperity by looking out of his tent, but Scripture states that Laban recognized the reason for his success by divination. We are not told by what means of augury Laban acquired this insight, but as a pagan in a pagan land, any number of options (flight of birds, entrails of slaughtered animals, etc.) would have been possible.

Laban made his counteroffer, and it was generous. “He continued, ‘name me your wages, and I will give it’” (v. 28). Though Jacob had arrived in Paddan-aram without money even for a dowry, now he was in a position to become a wealthy man, if he so chose. But Jacob was no novice at such encounters. He was not to be swayed by Laban’s flattery, as he had previously been influenced by his affections for Rachel. Then, he had agreed to work seven years without question, and another seven years after he had been tricked by Laban. In the past fourteen years, Jacob had learned that Laban was not to be trifled with.

So Jacob stated his understanding of the situation. <sup>29</sup>“You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. <sup>30</sup>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?” (v. 29-30). Jacob affirmed what Laban had implied, simply that it was his own indispensable role in Laban’s household that had been the source of Laban’s prosperity. While Jacob also acknowledged that it was the Lord Who did the blessing, he was eager to highlight the fact that the Lord blessed Laban because Jacob was there.

It may be that Jacob exaggerated the poverty of Laban before his arrival, but perhaps not. We might wonder if Laban had many servants, since it was his own daughter who cared for his flocks. Laban was able to take in Jacob and provide for him, and he was able to host a feast for “all the men of the place” (Genesis 29:22), but Scripture does not specify what ‘place’ that was and it may only have been a rather small party. In any case, Jacob concluded his argument by pointing out that he had his own, quite large family to provide for. He had two wives, eleven sons, and at least one daughter.

Whether Laban was persuaded by this or not Scripture does not say. He simply repeated his original offer. “He said, ‘what shall I give you?’” (v. 31). Laban wanted to talk bottom line. What would it take for Jacob to stay? And Jacob had a ready response. He replied, <sup>31</sup>“you shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: <sup>32</sup>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” (v. 31-32). In other words, Jacob did not demand wages, but rather livestock. He had served Laban for fourteen years and no doubt, was very familiar with the flocks and herds. He wanted to acquire his own property. Jacob essentially wanted to acquire the tangible resources by which he could support himself, and perhaps one day return to Canaan and carry on there.

Simply put, Jacob no longer wanted to be a hired servant. He did not want to be beholden to Laban. He would still manage Laban's interests, but now he wanted an interest of his own. It reminds the reader of Abraham's response to the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:21-23).

So, Jacob proposed to separate for himself the "speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats" (v. 32). In this part of the world, sheep were normally white and goats were usually black or brown. So Jacob was offering to take those sheep and goats which were, while not exactly mutants, certainly uncommon, and presumed inferior. They must have been much fewer in number than the white sheep and black and brown goats. Jacob did not want gold or silver, instead he was trusting in the Lord to provide for him from this very humble and uncertain beginning.

To further entice his calculating uncle, Jacob continued, "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" (v. 33). In other words, once the sheep and goats belonging to Jacob were removed from the flock, any white sheep or brown or black goats found among Jacob's herds would be considered poached. This implied that Laban would have access to and be able to inspect Jacob's flocks in order to verify that Jacob's herds had only increased as a result of natural procreation. Jacob wanted Laban to trust him. Jacob, it seemed, expected trouble with Laban, as well he might. Laban had tricked him on his wedding day and now he seemed reluctant to simply let Jacob leave Paddan-aram.

But Laban should have been more suspecting of his nephew as well. Laban likely did not know all the details of Jacob's past. He was unaware of the dealings Jacob had with his brother, Esau, and his father, Isaac. Had Laban known, it is certain that he would not have agreed so quickly. But "Laban said, 'good, let it be according to your word'" (v. 34). In fact though, Laban had allowed Jacob to name his wages, and since he had done so, and since those wages seemed reasonable, Laban could hardly have refused.

But having made the agreement, Laban quickly took action to make certain he had the advantage. Though the original proposal Jacob had made stated that he would "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" (v.32), Laban, himself, preemptively chose to determine which sheep and goats would become the property of Jacob. Clearly he mistrusted his nephew, and wanted to divide the flocks himself.

<sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>And he put a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks." (v. 35-36). Laban did not delay. He acted the same day. He took from his flocks as many of the sheep and goats promised to Jacob as he could gather. And to make certain Jacob could not undo his selection of these animals, he placed significant distance between himself and Jacob. This would help ensure that any wandering beasts did not make their way back to Jacob's herds. Also, Laban placed his own sons, who would presumably be more loyal to him than to their cousin, in charge of the

flocks. And again notice that Laban took sheep and goats that ought to have belonged to Jacob. Scripture does not state which sheep and goats were left behind, but it seems that Laban took those sheep and goats which Jacob had said would be his. Thus, Laban expected that when Jacob walked through the herds and selected the animals he had specified, there would be very few of them.

### **Jacob Tricks Laban**

But Laban's deceit worked to Jacob's advantage. Laban presumed that by leaving mostly white sheep and black and brown goats, very few irregular sheep and goats would be produced from that genetic stock. Yet, with Laban and his sons removed, Jacob was now able to carry out his own distinctive breeding plan in relative privacy. Jacob's basic strategy was to get these monochrome animals to produce variegated-colored offspring. To do this, Jacob resorted to the use of some local, sympathetic magic. As the biblical narrative recounted it,

“<sup>37</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>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. (v. 37-40).

Thus, Jacob took the small branches of some local trees and peeled them in such a way as to reveal the white fleshy part within. The resulting pattern Jacob produced left the visual image of the white internal flesh of the branch and the exposed brown bark. The particular trees Jacob selected, the poplar (probably the white poplar), almond, and plane, are plentiful in the Mediterranean region and offered very supple bark when young. Jacob then placed those branches in the area around which the flocks gathered to be watered. Since these animals often engaged in mating at this place as well, the flocks were faced with, quite literally, the multicolored pattern of the branches as they procreated.

And, to the surprise of learned geneticists today, the plan worked. Yet, there is absolutely no scientific evidence that indicates that the genetic factors in reproduction are determined by the colors animals (or humans, for that matter) viewed while engaged in sex. The ancient Jews attributed the success of Jacob's scheme to “ministering angels” who miraculously transported some of Laban's flock to Jacob (*Genesis Rabbah* 73.10). But there is no biblical support for that interpretation. In fact, this was simply the equivalent of the mandrakes Rachel acquired from Leah. It was a local legend and superstition, nothing more.

Interestingly, it is quite possible that these particular animals presented the phenotype of monochromatic coloring, while still containing the genotype of spottedness. That is they displayed one set of genetic factors, but still retained within their DNA other, recessive genes. This would result, according to the laws of heredity, in a twenty-five percent chance of producing spotted sheep. But despite the reality of the science behind reproduction, we cannot lose sight of the fact that this plan worked not because of Jacob's strategy, but because of God's design. God alone controls all reproduction, both human and animal. It was God Who opened the wombs of Sarah and Rachel, and it was God Who allowed these

monochrome animals to produce variegated colored offspring. In this particular case, God tolerated Jacob's methods, and chose to accomplish His will regardless.

But Jacob's plan included more than simply increasing his flocks. He also wanted the very best animals in his flocks. Therefore,

<sup>41</sup>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; <sup>42</sup>but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's (v. 41-42).

That is, Jacob applied his breeding program selectively. Jacob, as a seasoned herdsman, understood the qualities of the animals under his care. He recognized the healthy and vigorous and he also could distinguish them from the weak and lame. Therefore, when the more robust sheep and goats came in to be watered (and to breed) Jacob chose to display to them the multicolored branches. When those animals which were less so had their turn, the branches were removed.

As a result of Jacob's machinations, or perhaps in spite of them, over the years God allowed Jacob to prosper. "So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys" (v. 43). We can see that God's hand was upon him, as it had been with his father and grandfather before him,

"Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold" (Genesis 13:2).

<sup>35</sup>The Lord has greatly blessed my master, so that he has become rich; and He has given him flocks and herds, and silver and gold, and servants and maids, and camels and donkeys. <sup>36</sup>Now Sarah my master's wife bore a son [Isaac] to my master in her old age, and he has given him all that he has" (Genesis 24:35-36).

And Scripture makes it quite clear that like his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac, Jacob flourished not because of his own ingenuity but because God fulfilled His promises. As God had spoken to Jacob at Bethel,

<sup>13</sup>I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. <sup>14</sup>Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. <sup>15</sup>Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:13-15).

### **Takeaways**

Thus God continued to move His kingdom forward according to His perfect plan. That Jacob prospered despite less than ideal circumstances was clear. But it is also clear that Jacob's prosperity was entirely due to God's grace. So, too, it is with us. We may have much or little, but whatever we have we have not earned, we have been given. "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Let us be grateful and not greedy, and let us acknowledge the source of all the good things with which we have been blessed.