

## Genesis 31

Jacob had determined to return to his homeland in chapter 30, but his father-in-law imposed on him to work for Laban longer and to help make Laban wealthier. Laban could see that Jehovah God was making him wealthy through Jacob's work. When this chapter begins, we see that Laban's sons are envious of Jacob's success. This chapter records Jacob's separation from Leah and Rachel's family while he makes a covenant with Laban not to fight one another.

### TRANSLATION - 31:1-13:

**1** Then he heard the words of the sons of Laban saying, "Jacob is taking all which [is] our father's and from which our fathers he made all this wealth." **2** So Jacob saw the face of Laban and behold, it was not with him as yesterday, three days ago. **3** Then Jehovah said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred and I will be with you."

**4** So Jacob sent and called for Rachel and for Leah in the field with his flocks. **5** He said to them, "I see the face of your father that it is not with me as yesterday, three days ago and the God of my father was with me. **6** And you all know that in all my strength I served your father. **7** Your father has cheated me and replaced my wages ten times, but God did not give him to do evil with me. **8** If thus he said, "Speckled will be your wage," then they gave birth all the flock speckled and if thus he said, "Streaked will be your wage," then they gave birth all the flock streaked. **9** Then God snatched away the property of your father and gave [it] to me. **10** And it was a time the flock to conceive that I lifted my eyes and I saw in a vision and behold the male goats were mating on the flock streaked, speckled, and spotted.

**11** 'And the angel of God said to me in the vision, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am.' **12** And he said, 'Lift up, please, your eyes and see all the goats mating on the flock streaked, speckled, and spotted, because I saw all which Laban did to you. **13** I [am] the God of Bethel where you anointed there the pillar which you vowed to me there a vow. Now, rise, go out from this land and return to the land of your birth."

### WORDS:

"Wealth" (ver. 1; 200 times) is the word which might be translated "glory, honor, abundance." The related verb is found 114 times. "Kindred" (ver. 3; 22 times) means "relatives, offspring." It was used in 11:28; 12:1; 24:4, 7. "Strength" is found 125 times. "Cheated" (ver. 7) is only found ten times. "Replaced" (26 times) means "to pass on, pass by, replace, substitute." "Snatched away" (213 times) means "to be rescued, delivered, saved, tear from, snatch away, take away." "Mating" (ver. 10) comes from a normal verb "to go up, ascend, bring up or offer up a sacrifice".

"Anointed" (ver. 13; 70 times) means to "smear or anoint." The related noun refers to one anointed or the "Anointed One," transliterated "Messiah" (38 times). "To vow" (31 times) means to make a vow or a promise. The related noun is found in the verse as well.

### COMMENTS:

Jacob overhears, or it comes to his attention, Laban's sons criticizing Jacob's accumulation of wealth (the word is often translated "glory"). Laban's greed compels him to criticize Jacob. Jacob could see that Laban's attitude had grown negative toward him. About the same time, Jehovah God appeared to Jacob and told him to return to the land of Canaan, which Jehovah identifies as "the land of your fathers," because it had been promised to Jacob's fathers, Abraham and Isaac.

While in the field, Jacob called his two wives to ask for their opinions. This is not something a man does who was a "patriarch" in the misogynistic sense. In his discussion with Rachel and Leah, Jacob notes the changed attitude Laban had toward him. He notes that Jehovah God had blessed Jacob. He also defends himself, having served their father "with all my strength." Despite his service, Laban had changed Jacob's salary "ten times," which is

likely an exaggeration to prove his point; yet Jacob acknowledges that God had not allowed Laban to hurt him. Verse 8 is also, probably, an exaggeration but his point is to illustrate how God had blessed and provided for Jacob. In whatever way Laban tried to harm Jacob, God turned it into a blessing. In this way Jacob perceived that God had taken the livestock of Laban and, through his artificial breeding program, given the strength of the livestock to Jacob.

Jacob also shared a vision which God had given to him (31:11-13). In the vision, the angel (Messenger) of Jehovah was directing Jacob's process of breeding the goats and sheep. This informs us that the process Jacob had been using was apparently guided by God Himself. God identifies Himself as the "God of Bethel" for it was there that God had appeared to Jacob and promised to be with him and to bless him (28:19-20). In this vision, which was apparently the same vision Jacob had alluded to in verse 3, God tells Jacob to return home, to his father's land, to the land of his birth.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Jacob worked hard for Laban, fourteen years free labor for the hands of his daughters in marriage and then another six years in order to build up his own livestock. From this perspective, Jacob has had an admirable work ethic.

*Later Hebrew writers* - Laban is an Aramean and the Arameans will cause problems for the Israelites in future years, especially in the days of King David (2 Sam. 8 & 10) and later kings. They are found a total of 77 times in the OT.

#### TRANSLATION - 31:14-20:

**14** So Rachel answered and Leah and they said to him, "Still to us a share or inheritance in the house of our father? **15** Were we not considered foreigners to him because he sold us and consumed even the food, our silver? **16** Because all the riches which God delivered from our father to us He [did] also to our sons, even now all which God said to you, do."

**17** So Jacob got up and took up his sons and his wives on camels. **18** So he drove away all his livestock and all his possessions which he obtained, property of ownership which he possessed in Padan Aram to come to Isaac, his father, to the land of Canaan.

**19** But Laban went to shear his sheep and Rachel stole the teraphim which [were] her father's. **20** Also Jacob stole the heart of Laban, the Aramean, on account that he did not report to him that he was fleeing.

#### WORDS:

"Share" (ver. 14; 66 times) means a portion of an inheritance. The word was used first in Genesis 14:24. It is used as a synonym for "inheritance" (222 times), which can mean "property or possession." "Foreigner" (ver. 15) is found 46 times. "To consider" (124 times) means to "think, consider, esteem, reckon." "To sell, hand over" is used 80 times. The word "silver" is a literal translation; it should be understood as "money."

"To drive away" (ver. 18; 30 times) can mean to "drive flocks" or to "lead" people. "Possessions" is a related word to the verb "to obtain." "To steal" (ver. 19; 40 times) can also mean to "deceive." "Teraphim" is a transliteration of the Hebrew word (15 times). It refers to an idol, an image, even a statute. In an event from the life of David, they were apparently life-size (1 Sam. 19:13-16). In this context, it is obvious that they are rather small.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Shearing sheep happened in the spring of the year, shortly before the sheep gave birth. Timnah (38:12) has shown through archaeological excavations to have been a center for sheep shearing. Because it was such an important occasion, a celebration was held and neighbors did it all together.

We are not sure why Rachel stole the idols. From the Nuzi documents, we might understand that ownership of the *teraphim* carried also ownership of the estate. However, Rachel might have simply desired the idols for spiritual reasons.

#### COMMENTS:

In this short paragraph, Rachel and Leah (observe that Rachel is listed first) respond affirmatively to Jacob. They state that they had no portion or inheritance any more in their father's house. In fact, they feel as if they were foreigners in their dad's house. Their father "sold" them, they affirm, and has consumed their silver as if it were food. The service Jacob gave Laban those six years should have given Laban opportunity to set aside a dowry for his daughters, which he did not do. Therefore, Rachel and Leah do not feel as if their dad has any claim to them at all. So they agree with Jacob that God had taken away the strength of the flock and given it to Jacob and his wives and children. "Do whatever God has said to you."

Verse 17 records Jacob's preparations for departure. He arose one morning and set his wives and children on camels. The camels are noteworthy for two reasons: it illustrates Jacob's wealth and they serve a role in the account later. Then Jacob began to drive his livestock toward the land of Canaan. Jacob wisely chose a time when Laban would be shearing his sheep. He was already a three-day travel distance from Jacob but now he was involved in a grand, community-wide celebration shearing sheep. Laban would have been distracted with this business.

In the meanwhile, Rachel stole the *teraphim* ("household gods" - the first idols recorded in God's Word) that belonged to her dad. While the Nuzi documents seem to indicate possession of the *teraphim* had something to do with ownership of the estate, we do not know if that was true in this case. Some think that Rachel was idolatrous, that she wanted the protection of these household gods for Jacob. Later, Jacob will bury idols under a tree in Shechem (35:2-4). Perhaps she thought she could sell them, even melted down, and recoup some of the dowry that Laban had refused to set aside. Maybe she was just being mean. We simply do not know her motivations. It is interesting that Moses uses the same word for Rachel's behavior (she "stole" the *teraphim*) and what Jacob did to Laban (he "stole" his heart). Jacob did so by not telling the truth. In fact, this verb to "steal" is found seven times in this context: 31:19-20, 26-27, 30, 32, 39.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Jacob certainly did the right thing when he asked his wives for their opinions. It is also eye-opening to hear what Rachel and Leah had to say about their dad. Laban has hurt himself with his own daughters by his behavior. For fear of what Laban might do, Jacob decides to leave while Laban is distracted. Rachel also deceives her father by stealing his household gods.

#### TRANSLATION - 31:21-54:

**21** So he fled and all who [were] with him and he arose and crossed the river and set his face toward the mountain of Gilead. **22** Then it was reported to Laban on the third day that Jacob fled. **23** And he took his brothers with him and pursued after him a path of seven days and clung to him in the mountain of Gilead. **24** Then God came to Laban, the Aramean, in a dream at night and said to him, "Guard yourself lest you speak with Jacob whether good or evil."

**25** Laban overtook Jacob and Jacob pitched his tent in the mountain and Laban pitched [the tent of] his brothers in the mountain of Gilead.

**26** And Laban said to Jacob, "What did you do? And you stole my heart and you led away my daughters like captives of the sword. **27** What did you hide to flee and you stole from me and you did not report to me or I would send you away with joy and with songs with timbrel and with lyre. **28** Did you not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters now you were foolish

to do? **29** There is strength in my hand to do with you evil but the God of your fathers yesterday spoke to me saying, 'Guard yourself to speak with Jacob from good or evil.' **30** Even now to walk you have walked because to long for you have longed for the house of your father! Why did you steal my gods?"

**31** Then Jacob answered and he said to Laban, "Because I feared because you spoke thus, you will tear away your daughters from me. **32** With whom you find your gods, it will not live opposite our brothers. Investigate for yourself what [is] with me. And take for yourself." But Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

**33** So Laban came into the tent of Jacob and in the tent of Leah and in the tent of the two maids and he did not find them and he went out from the tent of Leah and came into the tent of Rachel. **34** But Rachel had taken the teraphim and put them in the saddlebag of the camel and sat on them and Laban felt through all the tent and did not find [them]. **35** Then she said to her father, "Don't be angry in your eyes, my lord, because I am not able to arise from before you because the way of women [is] with me." So he searched and he did not find the teraphim.

**36** Then Jacob became angry and he berated Laban and Jacob answered and he said to Laban, "What [is] my crime? What [is] my sin that you have pursued after me? **37** Because you have felt through all my things. What did you find from all my things from your house? Put it thus opposite my brothers and your brothers that they will judge between us two! **38** These twenty years I [have been] with you! Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried! Even the rams of your flocks I have not eaten! **39** Prey I have not brought to you. I, myself, bore the loss from my hand. You have required for something stolen in the day and stolen at night. **40** And I was, in the day, a drought consumed me and ice in the night and my sleep fled from my eyes. **41** This [is] to me twenty years in your house I have served you: fourteen years for my wives, your daughters, and six years among your flock and you have changed my wages ten times. **42** Perhaps the God of my father, the God of Abraham and Fear of Isaac, was with me because now in vain you have sent me in my affliction and weariness of my hands God has seen and He rebuked yesterday."

**43** So Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters [are] my daughters and the sons [are] my sons and the flock [is] my flock and all which you are seeing it [is] mine and to my daughters, what have I done to them today or to their sons which they bore? **44** Even now come, let us cut a covenant - I and you and it will be for a witness between me and you."

**45** So Jacob took a stone and set up a pillar. **46** Then Jacob said to his brothers, "You all gather stones." And they took stones and made a pile and they ate there on the pile.

**47** Then Laban called it "Jegar Sahadutha" and Jacob called it "Galeed." **48** So Laban said, "This pile a witness between me and your sons today." Therefore he called its name Galeed. **49** Also Mizpah, which he said, "Let Jehovah watch between me and you because a man will be absent from his friend. **50** If you humble my daughters and if you take wives in place of my daughters, there is not a man with us; God sees a witness between me and you."

**51** Then Laban said to Jacob, "Behold, this pile and behold the pillar which I erected between me and you. **52** A witness [is] this pile and a witness [is] the pillar if I do not cross over before you, this pile and if you do not cross over to me this pile and this pillar for evil. **53** The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, let them judge between us, the God of their father," and Jacob swore by the Fear of his father, Isaac.

**54** Then Jacob sacrificed a sacrifice in the mountain and he called to his brothers to eat bread and they ate bread and they spent the night in the mountain. **55** Then Laban arose early in the morning and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them and went and Laban returned to his place.

WORDS:

“To flee” (ver. 21; 63 times) can mean to “flee from, or pass through.” “To cling” (ver. 23; 55 times) means to “cling to, cleave to, stick closely, or pursue closely.” It was first used of Adam’s relationship with Eve in 2:24. “Brothers” is used seven times throughout the text and often with a more general meaning as “relatives” (31:23, 25, 32, 37, 46, 54). “To overtake” (ver. 24; 50 times) means to “reach or overtake.” “Captives” (ver. 26) is used 48 times. “To hide” (ver. 27; 34 times) means to “hide oneself, to keep hidden.” “Joy” (94 times) can mean “joy or gladness.” “Songs” is used 78 times while its related verb is used 88 times. The timbrel is found 17 times; it could be a tambourine or hand drum. The lyre is found 42 times; it was similar to the harp.

“To abandon” (ver. 28; 40 times) means to “leave, forsake, or abandon.” “To be foolish” is only used a few times but means to behave foolishly, frustrate, or make a mockery.” “Strength” (ver. 29) is found only a few times; it is spelled similar to the shorted form for “God” (e/). “To tear away” (ver. 31; 30 times) means to “tear off, tear away, or rob.” “Investigate” (ver. 32; 50 times) means to “recognize, be acquainted with, investigate.” “To search” (ver. 34; 10 times) means to “feel, touch, grope, or rummage through.” “To search” (ver. 35; 23 times) means to “search thoroughly, examine, track down.”

“To berate” (ver. 36; 72 times) has been seen before, meaning to “strive, contend, quarrel.” Here, it is quarreling motivated out of anger at a perceived injustice. Therefore, we translate the word “berate.” “Crime” (ver. 36; 93 times) means “transgression or crime.” This will be the first time the word is found in Genesis; it’s only other occurrence is at 50:17. It’s synonym is “sin,” seen first at 4:7 but also at 18:20 and 20:9. “To decide” (ver. 37; 59 times) means to “reprove, rebuke, punish, mediate, arbitrate.” “To miscarry” (ver. 38; 24 times) can refer also to human females, “to become childless.” “To bear the loss” (ver. 39; 240 times) is all one word. It is actually the word “to sin;” here, it carries a less spiritual and theological note. This will be the first occasion, of sixteen, of the word for “drought.” “Flee” (ver. 40; 28 times) means to “flee, wander, depart, or flutter (of wings).” “To change” (ver. 41; 26 times) means to “pass on or away (quickly), vanish, replace, or substitute.”

“Fear” (verses 42, 53; 49 times) is used here as a designation for God. The verb is used 25 times and can be understood to mean “startled, dread, awe, trembling.” This is its first use and only use as a name for God. “Affliction” is also used many times. The verb (found in ver. 50), “to afflict, to humble, to become low, to humiliate”, is used 79 times (notably in 16:6 of Sarah’s treatment of Hagar); the adjective, 80 times. The word “affliction” or “poverty”, as here, is used 36 times while a related adjective is used 25 times. “Weariness” refers to labor, work, or the product of such as in labour or gain (16 times). For the combination of the verb “to cut” used with the noun “covenant,” see 9:11. The two words are used together, likely resulting from the process of cutting animals apart during a ritual and meal.

“Let watch” (ver. 49; 37 times) means to “watch attentively, spy.” “To erect” (ver. 51; 28 times) can mean to “throw, cast, shoot.”

#### GRAMMAR:

“To walk you have walked” (ver. 30) and “to long for, you have longed for” are both emphatic constructions with the infinitive absolute and perfect tense of the same verbs.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

The Hebrew word for “witness” (used five times in this text) would be transliterated as ‘d while the word for “pile” would be g/. Thus, the word “Gilead” would be translated “witness pile” or “pile for a witness.” The distance from Haran to the hill country of Gilead is about 350 miles (640 km). Caravans normally would travel about twenty-three miles at the most. “Gilead” can refer to the city (Hosea 6:8) but also to a region east of Jordan (Judges 20:1).

See Genesis 28:18, 22 for the pillar Jacob set up in Bethel.

#### COMMENTS:

Jacob fled toward home, crossing the Euphrates River, moving toward the countryside of Gilead. Jacob had at least a three-day head start on Laban; however, he was moving with a dozen children and numerous cattle. It took Laban seven days to catch up with Jacob near Gilead. On the way, God appeared to Laban in a dream and warned him not to harm Jacob. This event had to have taken Laban by surprise because his *teraphim* did not talk! God had promised Jacob that He would care for Jacob; here, He is doing so (28:15).

When Laban came to talk to Jacob, he accused Jacob of deceiving him and taking away his daughters like captives at the point of a sword. We already have seen that his daughters do not consider themselves belonging in any way to Laban. The reference to the “sword” is, of course, an exaggeration. Laban is there with his relatives (“brothers,” literally) and so he heightens the accusation for their benefit. Laban says he would have thrown a party for Jacob if they had prepared properly for Jacob’s departure. We are skeptical of that! But, Jacob did not allow Laban to “kiss,” say goodbye properly to, his sons and daughters. “Sons” would refer to his grandsons and “daughters” would include both Rachel, Leah, and Dinah. He accuses Jacob of having acted foolishly; but he also informs Jacob that the “God of your father” has spoken to Laban and warned him not to harm Jacob. On top of it all, Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his *teraphim*, which he identifies in verse 30 as his “gods.”

Jacob’s response covers two verses. Jacob was afraid of Laban, afraid that Laban would take Rachel and Leah by force. Then Jacob gets to the heart of Laban’s frustration, the gods. Without knowing who stole them, Jacob sets the death penalty on whoever stole the *teraphim*.

In verses 33-35, we have a rather comical picture of Laban rushing from one tent to another, looking for his gods but not finding them. Jacob’s tent was first. He did not find the gods. He went into Leah’s tent and did not find his gods. He went into Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s tents and did not find them there. Then he entered Rachel’s tent and the first-time reader would be in suspense as to whether Laban will find them there.

Moses tells us that Rachel had taken the *teraphim* and hidden them in the camel’s saddle, apparently designed to be used on a flat surface as well as on the camel. Then Rachel sat on the saddle. Laban “felt” through all the tent but did not find them. The phrase “he did not find” is found three times in this text and, with the “feeling around,” we have the picture of Laban anxiously looking for his gods, but he could not find them.

Then twenty-years of frustration come pouring out of Jacob’s heart and mouth. Verses 36-42 is one of the longest speeches in the book of Genesis. Jacob berates his father-in-law for the treatment he has received, not just at that moment but for the past twenty years! Had Jacob committed a crime? A transgression? A sin? What motivated Laban to treat Jacob that way? Where were the gods he was looking for? Jacob challenged Laban to set them before everyone, so all could see - not Jacob’s guilt but Laban’s presumption.

Jacob continues his rant: for twenty years he had served his father-in-law and his ewes and female goats had never miscarried due to Jacob’s protection. Jacob had never used any for his own appetite. If any animal was lost to wild animals, Jacob bore the loss, which was not expected of shepherds. In verse 40, Jacob does a bit of his own exaggeration: the heat consumed him by day and the cold consumed him by night. He did not even sleep well for all the work he gave to Laban. For twenty years this went on, fourteen for the daughters in marriage and six years to build up his own livestock. But Laban repaid Jacob with twenty years of deceit. So Jacob affirms that it was God who had kept Laban from completely destroying Jacob. The God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, the One who compelled fear out of his father, had been with Jacob and He had brought Jacob to this point. This was the God who had already spoken to Laban in a dream that night. He was surely not a God with whom Laban was familiar!

Laban wants to insist, against all evidence and common sense, that the daughters are still his as well as the children and livestock. Yet, he wants peace with Jacob so he offers for them to make a covenant, a treaty, between the two of them. So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar, as a witness between the two.

Laban called the pile of stones, in Aramaic, “Jegar-Sahadutha.” Jacob called the pile of stones, in Hebrew, “Galeed.” Both words are transliterations of the phrase “pile of witness.” They also called the place Mizpah, a play on the verb “to watch” in the statement, “The Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from one another.” Finally, Laban threatens Jacob not to take any other wives than Rachel and Leah and not to mistreat them. God would be a witness to such misbehavior.

Laban then adds that the pile of stones, the pillar, would be a boundary marker between Laban and Jacob and their respective flocks and households. Then he calls on the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor (which was probably not the true Jehovah God; see Joshua 24:2), and the God of their father, to judge between them. At that point, Jacob agreed to the covenant and swore an oath by the Fear of his father, Isaac.

To complete the covenant ceremony, Jacob offered an offering (they are related words) on the mountain of Gilead and called on his relatives (“brothers,” literally) to eat the meal, which they all did together. They spent the night there and the next morning, Jacob and his father-in-law parted ways. After this verse, Laban will be mentioned only four more times (Gen. 32:4; 46:18, 25; Deut. 1:1).

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Jacob had twenty-years of pent-up frustration against his father-in-law. When he pinned his father-in-law to the wall with irrefutable accusations, Laban could only save himself by offering a covenant of nonaggression with his son-in-law. When it was all over, Jacob had his family and his livestock, free from his tyrannical father-in-law, free to return home. This event also ends the contact Abraham’s family will have with his father’s family in Haran. No one else will go there to find a wife.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - The Law will dictate that a woman having her menstrual cycle will make unclean what she sits on (Lev. 15:19-23). It would, therefore, strike the Israelites as humorous that the “gods” of Laban became unclean from Rachel’s cycle, even while the gods were stolen and then lost! Who could serve and worship such gods?

*Later Hebrew writers* - False gods in the form of idols will be the subject of later events (Judges 17), even humorous portrayals (Isa. 44:9ff).