

Genesis 30:25-43 - Jacob's Prosperity in Paddan-aram

Review

Last time, we saw that Jacob arrived in Paddan-aram – the home of his mother – after fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau. In Paddan-aram, Jacob married his uncle Laban's two daughters Leah and Rachel (Jacob's cousins) and took their maid servants Zilpah and Bilhah as concubines. Together, these four women bore eleven of Jacob's twelve sons and at least one daughter.

Jacob had served his uncle seven years each for his two wives, and after marrying them he continued in Laban's service at Paddan-aram.

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²⁵As soon as Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. ²⁶Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you." ²⁷But Laban said to him, "If I have found favor in your sight, I have learned by divination that ^[נָחַשׁ nāḥaš – learned, discerned, divined] the LORD has blessed me because of you. . ²⁸Name your wages, and I will give it." Genesis 30:25-28 (ESV)

There's a somewhat oversimplified saying that God gives us one of three possible answers to prayer – Yes, no, or not right now. Recall God's promise to Jacob from our study of Jacob's dream at Bethel.

¹⁵Behold, 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 28:15 (ESV)

God is sovereign in the things He has ordained, and He is always true to His promises. Yet the timing for Jacob's return to Canaan was not yet right. God had other work to accomplish in and through Jacob by keeping him in the service of his uncle in Paddan-aram.

I believe that the translation of the Hebrew word ^{נָחַשׁ} *nāḥaš* in Genesis 30:27 is difficult at best. Some modern English translations including the ESV, NIV, and CSB render it as *"...I have learned by divination..."* But the KJV and NKJV translate it as *"...I have learned by experience..."* The problem is the somewhat occult connotation of the English phrase "by divination." It implies some sort of mystical sign had been given to Laban. But ^{נָחַשׁ} *nāḥaš* really means "learned, discerned, or divined." I think what Laban was really saying was, "I've thought about this and concluded..." I think the 1995 edition of the NASB gets closest to the mark, saying *"...I have divined that..."* but the problem there is the somewhat archaic nature of that phrase. Therefore, some modern English speakers might not understand it.

All that speculation aside though, clearly God intended for Jacob to remain a while in Paddan-aram. Laban recognized that while Jacob did not.

²⁹Jacob said to him, "You yourself know how I have served you, and how your livestock has fared with me. ³⁰For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?" Genesis

30:29-30 (ESV)

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We really don't have any information about the economic prosperity of Laban and his family prior to Jacob's arrival. So, we'll just have to take Jacob's word. Surely Jacob and his family weren't destitute due to his serving his uncle. Perhaps Jacob was being a little melodramatic as he bartered with Laban for a pay raise.

31He said, "What shall I give you?" Jacob said, "You shall not give me anything. If you will do this for me, I will again pasture your flock and keep it: 32let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats, and they shall be my wages. 33So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen." 34Laban said, "Good! Let it be as you have said." Genesis 30:31-34 (ESV)

Jacob's idea for "wages" from Laban is intriguing. Clearly Jacob's intent was to take some of Laban's livestock as his own. We must assume that the spotted and speckled sheep and goats and the black lambs were considered inferior for some reason so that Laban might be willing to part with them. Furthermore, their coloration would serve as a marker for Jacob's livestock like a modern-day brand or ear tag.

Although Laban agreed to Jacob's plan, he clearly intended to cheat Jacob out of even these wages.

35But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in the charge of his sons. 36And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock. Genesis 30:35-36 (ESV)

Laban was a liar, a cheat, and a backstabber as we have already seen when he pulled the old bait-and-switch on Jacob for Leah and Rachel, gaining fourteen years of free labor from Jacob in the bargain. This trick of Laban's trying to cheat Jacob out of the wages they'd bargained for is just more of the same. But it all begs the question, "Why does God allow the wicked to prosper?" In this instance, we need look no further than God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that through their offspring – Jesus – all the families of the Earth would be blessed.

37Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks. 38He set the sticks that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, 39the flocks bred in front of the sticks and so the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. 40And Jacob separated the lambs and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban. He put his own droves apart and did not put them with Laban's flock. 41Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob

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would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the sticks, ⁴²but for the feebler of the flock he would not lay them there. So the feebler would be Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. ⁴³Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys. Genesis 30:37-43 (ESV)

Obviously, it was God's sovereign will that caused Jacob's flocks and herds to prosper in Paddan-aram despite Laban's initial rustling efforts. In fact, God made Jacob prosperous *despite* his lack of trust and reliance upon God, not because of this silly witchcraft that Jacob had perpetrated. Notice also that God blessed Jacob despite Jacob's effort to cheat Laban by only placing the sticks before the stronger breeding stock. As we've seen before, both Jacob and Laban were scheming connivers and cheaters always looking to get ahead at the expense of someone else. In this respect, they both richly deserved the treatment they received from each other over the years they were together.

What really confuses me about this story is the very fact that God has included it in His Word. Certainly, it does little to reveal the central fact of Jacob's prosperity – that God blessed Jacob in fulfillment of His plan to bring the blessing of eternal salvation out of sin and death through Jacob's offspring Jesus the **מָשִׁיחַ** *māšîaḥ*. Actually (as far as I can tell), the story tends to obscure that essential fact rather than illuminate it. Clearly Jacob believed his own trickery had allowed him to prosper. It isn't clear from the narrative whether Laban and the rest of Jacob's family knew anything about Jacob's shenanigans with the poplar and almond sticks – much less believed their supposed effect. Even more confounding is that Moses whom God used to write the story down hundreds of years later either believed Jacob's scheme had worked or included the story in the Genesis narrative at God's behest for some reason that I am not recognizing.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll look at God's call for Jacob to return to Canaan, and the acrimonious parting of Jacob and his uncle Laban.