

Genesis 31 – Jacob's Return to Canaan

Review

Last time, we saw that Jacob desired to return to Canaan, but his uncle Laban offered him whatever wages he might choose to remain in Paddan-aram serving him. Jacob asked Laban to give him all the speckled and spotted sheep and goats from his flocks and herds along with all the black lambs. Laban agreed but then tried to cheat Jacob out of these wages, giving these animals instead to his own sons and sending them far away.

We then looked at Jacob's attempt to stack the flocks and herds against Laban by placing white sticks in front of them when they bred. When they brought forth speckled, spotted, and black offspring Jacob assumed it was his own "clever" trickery that caused him to prosper, but we know that it was the will of God all along to make Jacob prosperous because He intended to bring forth Jesus His **מָשִׁיחַ** *māšîaḥ* from the line of Jacob's son Judah in fulfillment of His promise made to Jacob and his father and grandfather before him that through their offspring all the families of the world would be blessed.

God's Call for Jacob to Leave Paddan-aram

We now take up the story after Jacob had served Laban another 6 years while his flocks and herds flourished greatly.

¹Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has gained all this wealth." ²And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. ³Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you." Genesis 31:1-3 (ESV)

Recall from our previous study that Jacob had desired to return to Canaan some six years before, but God had prevented it. Of course, it was God's plan all along to bring Jacob back to the land of Canaan. We know with hindsight that Jesus the **מָשִׁיחַ** *māšîaḥ* had been ordained by God to be born in Bethlehem of the house of Jacob's descendant David. The circumstances of Jesus' birth into the flesh of a man from Nazareth were later foretold by God's prophets to whom these aspects of God's plan of salvation were revealed.

But in Jacob's day all those prophecies were yet to be revealed. Nevertheless, God had promised Jacob in his dream at Bethel that He would one day bring Jacob back to the land of Canaan (Genesis 28:15). Now at last, here in Genesis 31:3 God commanded Jacob to return there after serving his uncle for over 20 years. In this respect, Jacob's story is a valuable lesson for Christ followers today. Following God's will is just as much a matter of our trusting in God's sovereignty and goodness as it is obeying His commands. We must know that God's will for us is always better than our will for ourselves.

God allowed Jacob to remain in Laban's service to teach Jacob this same lesson, all the while blessing Jacob and his family with great prosperity.

²⁸And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Romans 8:28-29 (ESV)

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Yet sometimes the process by which God works His perfectly good will for us doesn't seem such a blessing. Often it involves suffering as God's Spirit conforms us into the image of His Son. For Jacob too, it seemed quite confusing and unpleasant as we shall soon read – perhaps all the more for Jacob himself since this perfecting of His saints into the image of Jesus was still many centuries in the future, and neither Jacob nor his descendants for many generations would live to see the fulfillment of God's promise to bless all the families of the Earth through Jacob's descendant Jesus.

Nevertheless, Jacob did and does see God's fulfillment of His plan of salvation through Jesus. Jesus Himself made this clear in His response to the Sadducees regarding resurrection.

26And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? 27He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong. Mark 12:26-27 (ESV)

How poignant and tragic it is that after Jesus Himself demonstrated this truth by His own resurrection, most of these Sadducees and most people living today still don't believe.

4So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was 5and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me. 6You know that I have served your father with all my strength, 7yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. 8If he said, 'The spotted shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore spotted; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore striped. 9Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. 10In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. Genesis 31:4-10 (ESV)

Once again, I must admit a strong prejudice against Jacob's words despite my assurance that God called him as a critical component of His plan of salvation for all mankind. Jacob was such a schemer and conniver that to me he is a bit like *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* in [Aesop's famous fable](#). Jacob had deceptively spoken so many times before, particularly to his own father (Genesis 27:19), that even when he told the truth, in my mind his words are always suspect.

Although Laban was most certainly just as much a schemer and conniver as Jacob, we have no way of knowing whether Laban really had changed Jacob's wages ten times. Maybe it was true, or maybe Jacob was exaggerating in the hopes of convincing his wives to leave their home. As it turned out, they didn't need much convincing as we shall soon see. One thing *does* ring true in Jacob's little tirade about Laban in this passage. Jacob seems to have finally recognized God's own sovereignty in the prosperity his family enjoyed during his last few years of service to Laban.

11Then the angel of God [מלאך האלהים mal'āk ʾēlōhîm] said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!' 12And he said, 'Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. 13I am the God of Bethel, where you

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anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.” Genesis 31:11-13 (ESV)

The phrase מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** translated here as “*the angel of God*” is worthy of an entire study devoted just to it. The word מלאך **mal'āk** means messenger or representative, and of course, the word מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** refers to the triune God. The only time in the Old Testament we find this phrase prior to this was when the angel of God spoke to Ishmael's mother Hagar after Abraham cast them out of the family and into the Negev desert (Genesis 21:17). Sometimes, we read about מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** speaking to someone from Heaven or in a dream. In other places we find מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** taking on a physical appearance. For example, in Exodus 14:19 מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** led the Israelites in the form of a pillar of cloud.

The phrase מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** is very closely related to the phrase מלאך יהוה **mal'āk Y'hōvâ** normally translated as “*the angel of the LORD*.” We read in Genesis 16 that מלאך יהוה **mal'āk Y'hōvâ** appeared to Hagar to foretell Ishmael's birth. We find both phrases in the story of Gideon's calling (Judges 6). In this case מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** took the form of a man who was carrying a staff. Here in Genesis 31:11-13 we find that מלאך ה' **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** spoke to Jacob in a dream as God had done from the top of the stairway to Heaven in Jacob's dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22) but apparently didn't take on any physical appearance.

14Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, “Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? 15Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. 16All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do.” Genesis 31:14-16 (ESV)

In the ancient traditions of many cultures and continuing in some even today, marriages were arranged by the bride and groom's parents (usually the father with only tacit approval from the mother). In these arrangements, a dowry or bride price was usually paid to the bride's father by the groom's father. We saw this in the case of Isaac's marriage to Rebekah (Genesis 24) where Abraham gave lavish gifts to Rebekah's family through his servant whom he had sent to Paddan-aram seeking a bride. Although we read that the riches bestowed upon Rebekah's family by Abraham's servant were gifts, they were actually Rebekah's bride price.

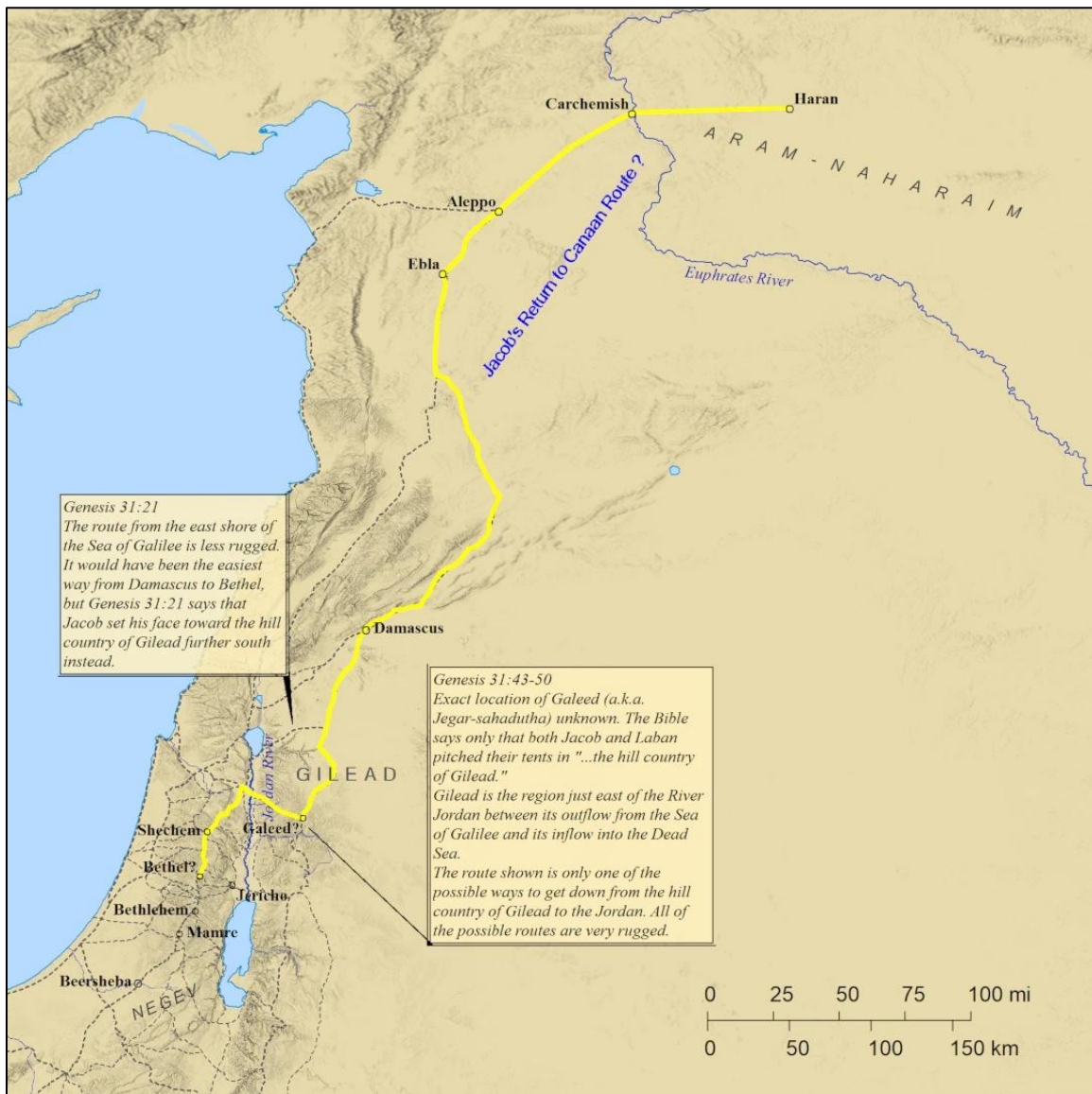
The intention of the bride price at least in ancient Hebrew tradition was that it should be held in trust for the daughter by the father in case her husband died, or some other circumstance required her to return to her parents' home. The entrusted bride price could then be used to provide for the returning bride. However (true to form), apparently Laban had already spent the bride price given for Leah and Rachel on other things. To be fair to Laban, we should remember that although Rebekah's bride price was quite substantial, we don't have any record in God's Word of the price Jacob gave for Leah and Rachel (apart from his labor).

A little later, we will take up the question whether Leah and Rachel were really followers of the one true and living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But in Genesis 31:16, we *do* see them urging their husband to obey Him. These words of theirs are good advice for all Christ followers – “...*whatever God has said to you, do.*”

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Jacob Flees Paddan-aram

17So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. 18He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. 19Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. 20And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. 21He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates [נָהָר nāhār - river], and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead. Genesis 31:17-21 (ESV)



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The journey from Haran to Bethel in Canaan was several hundred miles. It would have taken Jacob's family many weeks on foot and camels driving Jacob's flocks and herds before them. The route shown on this map is just a guess. One might well question why Jacob initially turned so far west before crossing the Euphrates. Of course, it was essential to have sources of drinking water along the way, and the more direct route across the desert would not provide the water needed. Note that after leaving Damascus, I am guessing that Jacob continued down the King's Highway that leads up from Egypt to Damascus on the east side of the hills of Bashan (the modern-day Golan Heights) east of the River Jordan. Although the route from Damascus down to the Sea of Galilee and then up through the mountains of Samaria was less strenuous and offered better sources of water, I believe Jacob took the more easterly route because Genesis 31:21 says specifically that Jacob had "*...set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.*"

Notice that the Hebrew נָהָר **nāhār** – **river** translated in the ESV as "*the Euphrates*" in Genesis 31:21 is a general word which can mean any river. Of course, the Euphrates was the only major river except the Jordan along the way from Haran to Canaan. Throughout the Old Testament, unless specifically stated otherwise as in "the river of Egypt" - מִנְהַר מִצְרַיִם – *nāhār miṣrayim*, the word נָהָר **nāhār** is assumed to refer to the Euphrates.

Before we move on, let's consider this mention in Genesis 31:19 of Rachel stealing her father's household gods. These were small carved or cast idols that were used in private devotions. From the fact that these idols were present in Laban's household we must infer that even if Laban's family were followers of the one true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, they were not exclusively His followers. Of course, this is a direct disobedience of God's first commandment given to Moses, but since the Law wasn't given by God until hundreds of years after Jacob left Paddan-aram, I guess we ought to cut Laban (and Rachel) a little slack.

Note that it was Rachel who stole her father's idols, not Leah. Remember when we studied Jacob's marriages, I mentioned that if Jacob had based his choice of a wife on character rather than just physical attraction, he might well have chosen Leah over Rachel. We don't know much about Leah's character, and we most certainly know that "the acorn doesn't fall far from the tree." But we do know from this episode that Rachel was a thief.

22When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, 23he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. 24But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad." 25And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. Genesis 31:22-25 (ESV)

Take another look at the map – Jacob's Return to Canaan. We don't know where Laban was when he got the news of Jacob's departure. It's fair to assume that Jacob would have left in the opposite direction from where Laban was shearing his sheep. Wherever Laban was, it took three days for someone to reach him and tell him that Jacob's family had left Paddan-aram. Then it took another seven days for him to catch up with Jacob. Jacob's group had to travel much slower because they were

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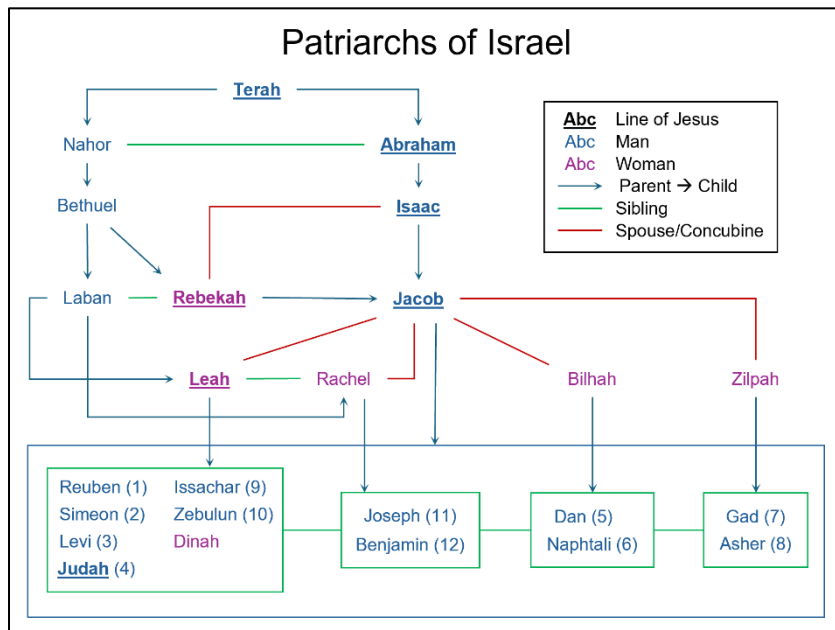
driving their flocks and herds before them. Nevertheless, Jacob had reached the hill country of Gilead before Laban caught up with him.

As already mentioned, we don't know whether Laban was a follower of the true God. We do know he had his own household idols, so he didn't follow God exclusively. Despite his idolatry though, God saw fit to come to Laban in a dream warning him not to bless or curse Jacob when he finally caught up with him.

²⁶And Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? ²⁸And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. ²⁹It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father [not ‘our’ father] spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’ ³⁰And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father’s house, but why did you steal my gods?” Genesis 31:26-30 (ESV)

Of course, we know that Jacob did not remove his family from Paddan-aram by force. Probably Laban knew that his daughters weren't satisfied with their living situation in his home. But whether or not Laban believed Jacob had taken the family away by force, he was certainly being disingenuous in saying that he would have celebrated their departure if Jacob had told him beforehand that they were leaving – far from it. Jacob had certainly prospered in Laban's service despite Laban's best efforts to swindle him out of his earnings. For his part, Laban also benefited from Jacob's service to him. Neither man had ever been perfectly honest and open in their dealings with one another. During their twenty years together, that hadn't changed at all.

Refer again to the Patriarchs of Israel diagram.



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Notice in Genesis 31:29 that Laban refers to “...*the God of your father*...” not *our* father. Presumably, Laban meant both Jacob's father Isaac and Jacob's grandfather Abraham who was Laban's grandfather Nahor's brother. Certainly, Nahor's family was familiar with Abraham's calling. In fact, Nahor and Abraham's father Terah had left Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan but stopped short in Haran (Genesis 11:31) before God called Abram (as he was then known) on to Canaan some twenty-five years later. Then, when Abraham's servant returned to Haran seeking a wife for Jacob's father Isaac, both Laban and his father Nahor acknowledged God's hand in the affair.

50Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, “The thing has come from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good. 51Behold, Rebekah is before you; take her and go, and let her be the wife of your master's son, as the LORD has spoken.” Genesis 24:50-51 (ESV)

Of course, no one can truly know another's heart. If the truth be told, often we don't even truly know our *own* hearts. But taken together, I think these passages all seem to indicate that Laban (and presumably his daughters) knew about God and acknowledged His power, yet they weren't wholehearted believers or followers. Hence, we see that the family still had household idols, perhaps acknowledging the one true God as just one of many gods, like most people in ancient societies did.

31Jacob answered and said to Laban, “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 32Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it.” Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. Genesis 31:31-32 (ESV)

Jacob might certainly have had a legitimate fear that Laban would take away his wives and children by force. Laban certainly had the means, and his past dealings with Jacob regarding his daughters may have concerned Jacob so much that he felt his only option in obeying God's command for his return to Canaan was to do it secretly.

Obviously, Jacob didn't have full knowledge of the facts, or he wouldn't have made the rash pronouncement in Genesis 31:32 about putting whoever might be found with any of Laban's possessions to death. I often wonder why God didn't put a 7-second delay on our mouths like we have on live radio and television broadcasts. If Jacob had taken some time to consider, he would have realized that Laban most likely didn't just make up his accusation about the theft of the idols. If Jacob had stopped to think before blurting out that whoever was found with the idols should die, he might have put two and two together to reason that one of the ladies must have stolen them.

My father used to call this “ignorance speaking with the voice of authority.” In this respect, Jacob's words on this occasion are a warning for us all that we should always think before speaking or acting.

33So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent and entered Rachel's. 34Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. 35And she said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is

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upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household gods. Genesis 31:33-35
(ESV)

Here we see that Rachel was not just a thief but also a liar. But who can really blame her given that her husband had just threatened to kill anyone who had taken Laban's household idols.

36Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, “What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? 37For 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, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. 39What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. 40There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold 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 have changed my wages ten times. 42If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.” Genesis 31:36-42 (ESV)

Having unwittingly gotten away with the theft of his uncle's household idols by his wife, Jacob's natural inclination was to double down. Jacob took the opportunity to not only lambaste Laban for what was in fact a legitimate complaint but continued in a self-pitying tirade. Poor Jacob! Isn't it just heart-breaking to read about his suffering in the desert heat and mountain cold?

Notice that we don't read about Laban objecting to Jacob's claim that Laban had changed his wages ten times. Maybe it was true after all – not an exaggeration. One thing that Jacob *did* get right in this diatribe is that he apparently finally recognized that it was by God's sovereign will and grace that he had prospered during his time under Laban – not any of the clever trickery at which Jacob was such a master.

Jacob's Covenant with Laban

43Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? 44Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” 45So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. 46And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. 47Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, [גַּרְשָׁדוּתָא gar-sāhādūtā' – witness heap] but Jacob called it Galeed. [גַּלְעָד gal'ēd - witness heap] 48Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it

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Galeed, ⁴⁹and Mizpah, [מיצפה mispâ -watchtower] for he said, “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight. ⁵⁰If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.” Genesis

31:43-50 (ESV)

Not to be outdone by his nephew, Laban matched Jacob’s childishness with some of his own. Of course, Jacob’s wives, children, and livestock were Jacob’s – not Laban’s. Jacob had labored for them over twenty years. Although Laban clearly knew this, he made himself out to be the victim of Jacob’s deception and theft saying he had no option but to resign himself to it. Who knows? Maybe Laban believed his own protestations. In any case, he then turned to the subject of a non-aggression pact between them.

Look again at the map – Jacob’s Return to Canaan.

We have no way of knowing for certain where Galeed (a.k.a. Jegar-sahadutha and Mizpah) was located. All we know from the Biblical text is that Jacob had pitched his tents somewhere in the hill country of Gilead, and that Laban caught up with him there. The specific location is interesting, but unimportant.

Notice that it was Laban – not Jacob – who first called in Genesis 31:49 upon *the LORD* [יהוה Y’hōvâ] and then called in the next verse upon *God* [אלהים 'ēlōhîm] as witness of the pact between the two men. We must not read too much into this though. Although God was known at the time to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *אל שדי 'el šaday – God almighty*, It wasn’t until later that God identified Himself to Moses as *יהוה Y’hōvâ*.

³I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, [אל שדי 'el šaday] but by my name the LORD [יהוה Y'hōvâ] I did not make myself known to them. Exodus 6:3 (ESV)

The fact that we find *יהוה Y’hōvâ* in Genesis 31:49 and *אלהים 'ēlōhîm* in Genesis 31:50 is therefore a strong indication that God used Moses to write down the Genesis narrative rather than someone else prior to Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush.

⁵¹Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and 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 over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. ⁵³The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, ⁵⁴and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.

⁵⁵Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.

Genesis 31:51-55 (ESV)

I frankly find these final few verses of Genesis 31 somewhat disconcerting. Notice that Laban once more refers to the God of Abraham and mentions that He is also the God of Nahor – Abraham’s

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brother and Laban's grandfather, implying that He is also the God of *their* father Terah. Yet none of these men apart from Abraham and his family ever exhibited any evidence of their exclusive devotion to the one true and living God. In fact, we know for certain that Laban also worshipped household idols either exclusively or alongside the real God.

Yet when it came time to formalize their covenant, it was Laban – not Jacob – who called upon the Name of God as witness. Instead, Jacob swore by his own human father Isaac. This begs the question to whom Jacob offered sacrifices in formalizing the agreement – God or Isaac? We must assume they were offered to God, but it still bothers me.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll read about Jacob's reconciliation with his twin brother Esau from whose wrath Jacob had fled to Paddan-aram twenty years before.