

GENESIS 31

Verses 1–21: Jacob Left for Canaan with His Wives and Children

Over time, Laban’s flocks were seriously diminished as new offspring were abnormally colored—and thus became Jacob’s—causing Laban’s sons (who stood to inherit his flocks) to accuse Jacob of theft (Genesis 31:1). Jacob perceived a change in Laban’s “countenance,” that “it was not toward him as before” (verse 2). In Hebrew, “countenance” is *panim*, “face.” This gives a “physical concreteness” to what Jacob saw. “The point is that Jacob looks at his father-in-law’s face and sees in it a new and disquieting expression of hostility and suspicion.”¹

Jacob thus sensed an urgency to depart, which the Lord then confirmed by commanding him to return to Canaan (verse 3). In explaining their sudden need to depart to Leah and Rachel, Jacob recounted events of the previous years in a way that emphasized Laban’s duplicity while also highlighting how Jacob had been blessed by the Lord and had prospered (verses 5–13). The sisters put their rivalry aside and made a united decision in the best interests of their family (verses 14–16).²

Leah and Rachel noted that their father had not left any inheritance for them but had rather “devoured . . . our money” (verses 14–15). In the ancient Near East, it was customary for the father of the bride to provide a dowry, but Laban had evidently neglected to do so for either of his daughters’ marriages to Jacob. “The dowry was compensation for a daughter’s separation from the family property [and inheritance] and

¹ Robert Alter, trans., *The Hebrew Bible*, 3 vols. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:111, note on verse 2.

² Camilla Fronk Olson, “The Matriarchs: Administrators of God’s Covenantal Blessings,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament Through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 409.

was a critical part of establishing a new household, including what she contributed toward an inheritance for the next generation and her security should she become widowed or divorced.”³

Laban’s neglect to provide his daughters with dowries could help explain why Rachel stole the “images” before their departure (verse 19). The Hebrew term used here is *teraphim*, which refers to small, human-like figurines that functioned as household gods or idols.⁴ A number of theories have been proposed for why Rachel did this, but some northern Mesopotamian legal codes indicate that possession of the household gods signified one’s status as the chief heir. Thus, Rachel may have been trying to rightfully secure the inheritance her father had denied to her and Leah.⁵

Verses 22–35: Laban Pursued Jacob and Searched for His Idols

After three days, Laban noticed that Jacob and his family had fled (Genesis 31:22). There is a certain amount of drama to the narrative as Laban gathers “his brethren” and goes out in pursuit of Jacob, overtaking him in seven days (verse 23). The initial confrontation was anticlimactic as Laban merely complained that Jacob did not give him a chance to give him a proper send-off with feast and song or to bid farewell to his daughters and grandchildren (verses 26–28). Laban was likely being duplicitous here since he ultimately revealed he had the power to inflict harm upon Jacob but was restrained by the command of the Lord he had received in a dream the night before (verses 24, 29).

The drama picked up again, however, when Laban revealed what really prompted his pursuit: “Wherefore hast thou stolen my gods?” (verse 30). Jacob, oblivious to what Rachel had done, permitted Laban and his men to search his entire camp, stipulating that “with whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live” (verse 32). The tension rose as Laban searched each tent—first Jacob’s, then Leah’s, then Bilhah’s and Zilpah’s—finding nothing along the way, until finally coming to Rachel’s (verse 33). The suspense builds as the reader wonders if she will be found out.

For her part, Rachel executed a brilliant plan. She placed the idols in her “camel’s furniture” (verse 34), referring to a cushion or saddle on which she would sit while riding her camel, which evidently had a storage compartment inside.⁶ She then sat upon the cushion and said she “cannot rise up” because the “custom of women” was upon her (verse 35), meaning that she was menstruating.⁷ In ancient Near Eastern

3 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 408.

4 Camilla Fronk Olson, *Women of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2009), 76–77.

5 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 78.

6 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 78.

7 David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, 4th ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan

cultures, blood—and menstrual bleeding specifically—was perceived as “impure,” and touching or being near a menstruating woman was taboo.⁸ In Leviticus, anything a menstruating woman *sat upon* was made impure, and anyone who touched it had to ritually purify him- or herself (Leviticus 15:22). Thus, Laban did not attempt to make her move or search her camel cushion and so did not find the household idols (verse 35).

The irony of the situation would have been palpable to an ancient audience. Living in a patriarchal society, Laban likely did not believe that female descendants were worthy heirs, but here Rachel used “a symbol of her womanhood” to prevent him from taking the *teraphim*, symbols of legitimate inheritance, from her.⁹ Furthermore, by sitting upon them during menstruation, she desecrated them in an act “of willful defilement and scornful rejection of their religious significance.”¹⁰

Verses 36–55: Jacob and Laban Made a Covenant

As the search concluded, Jacob lost his patience with Laban and thus responded indignantly to what he perceived as yet another injustice committed against him by Laban (verses 37–42). In the midst of his impassioned speech, Jacob made reference to something that had previously gone unmentioned: when livestock in Jacob’s care had been attacked and slain by beasts of prey, Laban made Jacob “bare the loss of it” (verse 39). This was contrary to the legal customs of the time, in which the owner of the flock, not the hired hand, was expected to bear any losses caused by the attack of wild beasts.¹¹

Laban ignored Jacob’s accusations of malfeasance and asserted ownership over all that was Jacob’s (verse 43). Nonetheless, he effectively proposed a truce: a heap of stones was gathered as a boundary marker between their two households (and eventually, nations), with both agreeing not to trespass that boundary marker (verses 44–52). A seemingly odd detail in the covenant made here is that Jacob was forbidden from taking any other wives (verse 50). Some scholars have pointed out the irony in Laban making this demand when it was Laban who had forced Jacob to marry more wives than he wanted in

(New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 55, note on verse 35.

8 John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener, eds., *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 73, note on 31:35.

9 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 77.

10 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship* (New York, NY: Melton Research Center, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 201.

11 Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 60–61.

the first place.¹² Such stipulations from the prospective father-in-law, however, were not uncommon in marriage contracts from northern Syria at the time.¹³

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¹² Wenham, “Genesis,” 61.

¹³ Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 202.