



## Genesis - Chapter Thirty One

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.b Genesis 25:19-36:43 - Isaac's Descendants (continues)

II.b.xii Genesis 30:25-31:21 - Jacob Prepares to Return to Canaan (continues/concludes)

### Summary of Chapter Thirty One

The relationship between Laban's family and Jacob had deteriorated. Therefore, God instructed Jacob to return to the land of Canaan, so with the agreement of his two wives, he gathered all he possessed and set out while his father-in-law was attending the shearing of his own flock.

However, Jacob's family were not innocent in this matter for Rachel stole her father's household gods and Jacob deceived Laban by not telling him that he intended to leave, taking Laban's daughters and grandchildren with him.

After three days Laban learned of their flight and pursued them, catching up with them after a week. However, God had appeared to Laban in a dream to instruct him to do no harm to Jacob when he caught up with him. After Laban remonstrated with Jacob and announced that his household gods had been stolen, Jacob stated that he was afraid that Laban would have forcibly taken away his wives and children but that none of them had stolen anything. If Laban were to find his gods then the person who had them could be killed for the theft. Laban searched all of Jacob's family but when he came to Rachel she deceived him and he did not search properly to find his possessions.

Jacob then complained to Laban that he had not been treated well despite working for him for twenty years, seven for each wife and six for the flock he had raised. So the two men made a covenant, agreeing that Jacob could leave on the promise that he would always care for his wives and children.

## II.b.xii.2 Genesis 31:1-21 - Jacob Flees with Family and Flocks

The sons of Laban saw that Jacob was increasing his own flock and wealth, and believed it was their wealth he was taking. In addition, Laban no longer held Jacob in favour. At this time God appeared to Jacob and stated he should return to Canaan and Jacob's wives agreed.

While Laban was away shearing the sheep of his own flock, Jacob gathered all his possessions, his animals and his family, setting off towards the west. Unknown to Jacob, Rachel stole her father's household gods.

<sup>1</sup> Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, 'Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father.'<sup>2</sup> And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favourably as he did before.<sup>3</sup> Then the LORD said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.'

### Genesis 31:1-3

Jacob has taken all that was our father's. It was not that Jacob had taken anything belonging to Laban. Rather, it was that his wealth was increasing in proportion to Laban's wealth. The problem was not that Jacob stole; it was that Laban's sons were filled with envy. Envy will distort the truth. Jacob had not taken anything of Laban's, but envy will lie. Therefore, Jacob's growing wealth becomes a source of friction within Laban's family. Even Laban's own attitude toward Jacob changes, for he did not regard him as favourably as he did before. Against this background, the LORD instructs Jacob to return to Canaan: <<*And the ransomed of the LORD shall return*>> (Isaiah 35:10a), and: <<*I will grant you mercy, and he will have mercy on you and restore you to your native soil*>> (Jeremiah 42:12).

Although Jacob was living in the land where Abraham had first lived and in which his own mother Rebekah had been born, God views the land of your ancestors to be the land that he had promised to Abraham as an inheritance for his descendants.

And I will be with you. This was the most important aspect. If God were with Jacob, he could be at peace and confident in any difficulty, or at least had to the opportunity for peace and confidence.

<sup>4</sup> So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was,<sup>5</sup> and said to them, 'I see that your father does not regard me as favourably as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me.'<sup>6</sup> You know that I have served your father with all my

strength; <sup>7</sup> yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but God did not permit him to harm me. <sup>8</sup> If he said, “The speckled shall be your wages”, then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said, “The striped shall be your wages”, then all the flock bore striped. <sup>9</sup> Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father, and given them to me. <sup>10</sup> ‘During the mating of the flock I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats that leaped upon the flock were striped, speckled, and mottled. <sup>11</sup> Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, “Jacob,” and I said, “Here I am!” <sup>12</sup> And he said, “Look up and see that all the goats that leap on the flock are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. <sup>13</sup> I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth.”’

### Genesis 31:4-13

In a long speech, Jacob explains to Rachel and Leah his reasons for returning to his homeland. In doing so he contrasts the actions of their father with the God of his father: your father does not regard me as favourably as he did before.

But the God of my father has been with me. While Laban has exploited Jacob for his own advantage, God has consistently worked against Laban’s schemes.

You know that I have served your father with all my strength. This shows Jacob knew his wives were aware of his righteous conduct and Laban’s unfair treatment of him: yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times: <<*These ten times you have cast reproach upon me; are you not ashamed to wrong me?*>> (Job 19:3). Laban’s treatment of Jacob is seen as sinful in the sight of God: <<*When any of you sin and commit a trespass against the LORD by deceiving a neighbour in a matter of a deposit or a pledge, or by robbery, or if you have defrauded a neighbour*>> (Leviticus 6:2).

Then the angel of God said to me in the dream. Significantly, there was much more to what the Lord said to Jacob than what was reported in v.3, which was completely true, but there was more to it than this simple brief word from the Lord.

The God of Bethel. It was at Bethel that God had promised to be with Jacob (28:15). Some twenty years later, Jacob acknowledges God’s faithfulness. God now instructs Jacob to return to the land of his kindred.

<sup>14</sup> Then Rachel and Leah answered him, ‘Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house? <sup>15</sup> Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has been using up the money given for us. <sup>16</sup> All the property that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you.’

#### Genesis 31:14-16

Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father’s house? In their response, Rachel and Leah also contrast their father’s actions with those of God, as confirmed in the comments made on vv.4-13. Whereas the former has in practice disinherited them, God has provided for them and their children. There response is reminiscent of the rebellion of Sheba: <<***We have no portion in David, no share in the son of Jesse!***>> (2 Samuel 20:1b).

Do whatever God has said to you. Their support of Jacob in a costly and perhaps dangerous move was significant. It was a huge undertaking to move such a large family so far. If not for the support of his wives, Jacob perhaps would not have done what the Lord had told him to do. This may be the first time in quite a while when the sisters Leah and Rachel agreed on anything. They could agree in uniting against a common problem, their own father Laban.

<sup>17</sup> So Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels; <sup>18</sup> and he drove away all his livestock, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

#### Genesis 31:17-18

So Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels. Jacob intended a quick departure, travelling as fast as possible. It also demonstrates his great wealth that his entire family could travel on camels.

<sup>19</sup> Now Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father’s household gods.

#### Genesis 31:19

Rachel stole her father’s household gods. Household gods translates the Hebrew word *terapim*. In spite of their being mentioned quite often in the Bible, knowledge of these objects is vague, the term often being translated as images or idols. In this instance, since Laban later refers to them as ‘gods’ in v.30, they may have been small figurines depicting particular gods. The narrator does not explain why Rachel took her father’s gods. Perhaps she believed that this would prevent

him from using their power to overcome Jacob. Possibly she thought that they would bring her good fortune. Maybe she wanted them only for their inherent value, given that they may have been made of costly metal. Whatever the reason, it later becomes evident that Jacob had no knowledge of their misappropriation (v.32).

**It should always be remembered that there is only one true God: <<Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD>> (Joshua 24:14), <<Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, 'If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the LORD, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines'>> (1 Samuel 7:3), <<Moreover, Josiah did away with the mediums, wizards, teraphim, idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, so that he established the words of the law that were written in the book that the priest Hilkiah had found in the house of the LORD>> (2 Kings 23:24), and: <<For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim>> (Hosea 3:4).**

<sup>20</sup> And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramæan, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee.

#### Genesis 31:20

Jacob deceived Laban. The Hebrew idiom translated here as deceived is literally 'stole the heart'. The repetition of the verb to steal in vv.19-20 highlights one of the important themes of this passage for, although Jacob takes only what rightly belongs to him, Laban later accuses him of having stolen everything that is now in his possession (v.43).

<sup>21</sup> So he fled with all that he had; starting out he crossed the Euphrates, and set his face towards the hill country of Gilead.

#### Genesis 31:21

The hill country of Gilead. The region lies to the east of the Jordan River, several hundred miles south of Paddan-aram.

#### II.b.xiii Genesis 31:22-32:2 - Laban Accuses Jacob in Gilead

When Laban discovers that Jacob and his family have fled, he pursues Jacob, catching up with him in Gilead. Accusation and counteraccusation eventually result in the making of a treaty that guarantees protection to both parties.

## **II.b.xiii.1 Genesis 31:22-42 - Laban Overtakes Jacob**

Although the flocks were three days apart and Jacob had a three day start, Laban was able to pursue and catch up with Jacob after just one week. However, the night before Laban encountered Jacob, God appeared to Laban to instruct him to do nothing to harm Jacob.

Laban claims that Jacob had stolen his family, his sheep and his household gods. To counter this Jacob states that he only fled in fear but that he had worked for twenty years to pay for his wives and the animals he had. As for the gods, he had no knowledge and challenged Laban to find them on pain of death to the person who had them. Laban searched each person's tent but when he came to Rachel he found her seated, stating she could not stand because of her period. She was in fact concealing the stolen items but Laban accepted her account and did not discover the items.

Following this, the two men made peace with a covenant in the sight of God, agreeing there would be no further conflict between them providing Jacob took proper care of his family and did not take any more wives.

<sup>22</sup> On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. <sup>23</sup> So he took his kinsfolk with him and pursued him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. <sup>24</sup> But God came to Laban the Aramæan in a dream by night, and said to him, 'Take heed that you say not a word to Jacob, either good or bad.'

### **Genesis 31:22-24**

**On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled.** The flocks had been deliberately set three days apart so that Jacob could not take any of Laban's flock. This separation of flocks and families meant that Laban did not hear of Jacob's departure straight away, giving them a head start.

Laban catches up with Jacob about ten days after his initial departure. By this stage Jacob, with his family and livestock, has reached **the hill country of Gilead.**

**God came to Laban the Aramæan in a dream by night.** The need for God's message to Laban shows that Laban did have evil intention towards Jacob, and God protected Jacob through this dream.

<sup>25</sup> Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsfolk camped in the hill country of Gilead. <sup>26</sup> Laban said to Jacob, 'What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. <sup>27</sup> Why did you flee secretly and deceive me and not tell me? I

would have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre. <sup>28</sup> And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? What you have done is foolish. <sup>29</sup> It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, “Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.” <sup>30</sup> Even though you had to go because you longed greatly for your father’s house, why did you steal my gods?’ <sup>31</sup> Jacob answered Laban, ‘Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. <sup>32</sup> But anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsfolk, point out what I have that is yours, and take it.’ Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.

### Genesis 31:25-32

What have you done? You have deceived me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword. Laban seeks to portray Jacob in a poor light by contrasting his secretive flight with Laban’s desire to have a joyful send-off. Laban falsely charges Jacob with having forced his daughters to go with him. But Rachel and Leah had willingly agreed to accompany their husband (v.16).

The God of your father. Although Laban acknowledges that God has spoken to him (v.24), he refuses to acknowledge God as his own; he is the God of Isaac. To underline this point, Laban asks Jacob, why did you steal my gods?

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

### Genesis 31:33-35

Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you. It would have been customary for Rachel to show respect to her father by standing: <<*You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD*>> (Leviticus 19:32).

To prevent Laban from having access to [the camel's saddle](#), where his gods are hidden, Rachel tells her father that [the way of women is upon me](#). This refers to a woman's regular menstrual discharge. Culturally, it would not be proper to come into contact with a woman during her menstruation. This would later become enshrined in the Mosaic Law: <<*When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. Whoever touches anything upon which she sits shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening; whether it is the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening*>> (Leviticus 15:19-23).

Although Laban has accused Jacob of deception, his own daughter is the principal culprit. The picture of Rachel sitting on and concealing Laban's gods emphasises the total impotence of such idols.

<sup>36</sup> Then Jacob became angry, and upbraided Laban. Jacob said to Laban, 'What is my offence? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me?' <sup>37</sup> Although you have felt about through all my goods, what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsfolk and your kinsfolk, so that they may decide between us two. <sup>38</sup> These 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. <sup>39</sup> That which was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself; of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. <sup>40</sup> It was like this with me: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. <sup>41</sup> These twenty years I have been in your house; I served you for fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. <sup>42</sup> If 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 labour of my hands, and rebuked you last night.'

### [Genesis 31:36-42](#)

[Then Jacob became angry, and upbraided Laban.](#) It is likely that this anger built up in Jacob for a long time, almost certainly over the 13 years since he had been

tricked into marrying Leah. Perhaps in his mind he practiced this speech over and over again, and now his anger boiled over.

What is my offence? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? Jacob responds sharply to Laban's unproven accusation of theft by recounting the scrupulous manner in which he cared for Laban's herds. David made similar remonstrations with Saul: *<<you may know for certain that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you are hunting me to take my life>>* (1 Samuel 24:11b). During twenty years of arduous labour Jacob never once took advantage of Laban, even when the latter sought to mistreat him.

What have you found of all your household goods? After searching, Laban found no evidence of the stolen gods he accused Jacob of taking. The accusations would have fuelled Jacob's anger all the more.

Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried. This indicates that Jacob had taken great care of the animals in his charge to ensure their welfare and that Laban's flocks had grown successfully.

I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. Jacob's integrity was intact for he had never taken anything that did not belong to him.

That which was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself; of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. It was an ancient custom that a shepherd could bring the torn carcass of a sheep to his owner, as evidence that he was brave enough to not let the wolf devour it or take it away, and thus the shepherd would be excused. This was later enshrined in law: *<<If it was mangled by beasts, let it be brought as evidence; restitution shall not be made for the mangled remains>>* (Exodus 22:13). Jacob elaborates even further by stating that when any of Laban's flock were lost then Jacob took full responsibility for the loss and bore the cost, presumably replacing the lost animals with those from his own flock.

It was like this with me: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. Jacob's service to Laban was sacrificial: *<<I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids>>* (Psalm 132:4), like Paul's service: *<<in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked>>* (2 Corinthians 11:27). He endured much so that Laban could grow wealthy through Jacob's suffering.

You have changed my wages ten times. Jacob endured repeated unfairness from Laban as his employer without ever complaining or failing in his service.

If 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. Jacob claimed that it was God's protection that sent him away in a way that

prevented Laban from taking what belonged to Jacob: <<*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side – let Israel now say – if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us; then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us; then over us would have gone the raging waters*>> (Psalm 124:1-5).

The term Fear, as a metonym, is clearly a substitute for God. Possibly, since Isaac treated God with reverential fear, God could be designated as the ‘One Feared by Isaac’ or, as here, the Fear of Isaac. Another possibility is the idea that Isaac’s God induced fear in others; see, for example, the reaction of Abimelech in 26:10-11 and 26:28-29.

### II.b.xiii.2 Genesis 31:43-32:2 - Laban and Jacob Make a Covenant

Because of God’s instruction to him, Jacob’s sound defence of his right to his family and flock, and the failure to uncover the stolen gods, Laban seeks peace with Jacob. The two men agree on a covenant in the sight of God that Jacob will care for his family appropriately and that he will take no more wives.

<sup>43</sup> Then 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 today about these daughters of mine, or about their children whom they have borne?’ <sup>44</sup> Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.’

#### Genesis 31:43-44

All that you see is mine. In spite of Jacob’s observations, Laban continues to claim ownership of everything that Jacob has taken. Then, in a gesture possibly intended to save face, Laban invites Jacob to make a covenant or treaty with him. The pretext for the treaty is Laban’s supposed desire to protect the future of his daughters and grandchildren (v.50).

<sup>45</sup> So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar. <sup>46</sup> And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, ‘Gather stones,’ and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap.

#### Genesis 31:45-46

Two separate witnesses are set up, one by Jacob and the other by his kinsfolk. Jacob uses one stone to create a pillar, similar to what he did earlier at Bethel (28:18-22). His kinsmen pile up stones to form a heap. The creation of two witnesses may have been intended to underline the seriousness of the oath. More

likely, the two witnesses reflect in some way the deities worshiped by Jacob and Laban. Jacob's single stone stands in marked contrast to the heap of stones set up by Laban and his relatives. Jacob's monotheistic faith is set alongside the polytheism of Laban. Since ancient Near Eastern treaties normally involved the gods as witnesses, the treaty between Jacob and Laban also required divine witnesses. Because Jacob is not prepared to compromise his monotheistic faith, two witnesses are established.

<sup>47</sup> Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. <sup>48</sup> Laban said, 'This heap is a witness between you and me today.' Therefore he called it Galeed, <sup>49</sup> and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, 'The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. <sup>50</sup> If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me.'

#### Genesis 31:47-50

The Aramaic expression Jegar-sahadutha and the Hebrew term Galeed both mean witness heap. Mizpah, meaning watchtower, became the name of a settlement north of the Jabbok River; it was the hometown of Jephthah (Judges 11:11). The name Mizpah was also given to an important city located on the boundary between Israel and Judah, 8 miles or 13km northwest of Jerusalem, refer to Judges Chapter Twenty.

Remember that God is witness between you and me. Although Laban did not accept God as his god, he did recognise his power and the effect he would have over Jacob if he broke his oath. God is frequently called to be a witness: <<**He said to them, 'The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.'** And they said, 'He is witness'>> (1 Samuel 12:5), and: <<**Even now, in fact, my witness is in heaven, and he that vouches for me is on high**>> (Job 16:19), or he declares himself to be the witness: <<**because they have perpetrated outrage in Israel and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them; I am the one who knows and bears witness, says the LORD**>> (Jeremiah 29:23).

<sup>51</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, 'See this heap and see the pillar, which I have set between you and me. <sup>52</sup> This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. <sup>53</sup> May the 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,

<sup>54</sup> and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country.

#### Genesis 31:51-54

I will not pass beyond this heap to you. The best solution for Jacob's in-law problems was for him to separate from Laban. Therefore they set up a pillar to be a barrier between them. There is wisdom in having some separation from in-laws. The Bible says: <<*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh*>> (Genesis 2:24). Laban and Jacob seemed to have more problems than many, so their separation was extreme but it was clearly the only solution they could find to ensure peace between the two.

Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread; and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country. The sacrifice to God is offered as a feast to those present was often the case in their culture: <<*They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel*>> (Exodus 32:6). Later, God's law would stipulate which parts of the sacrifice could be eaten and who was permitted to eat it.

<sup>55</sup> Early in the morning Laban rose up, and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.

#### Genesis 31:55

Laban departed and returned home. After a proper farewell, Laban saw his daughters and grandchildren for the last time.

Boice writes: "This is the last we hear of Laban in the Bible, and it is good that this is the end of him. Laban is of the world, and Jacob needed to be freed from this world in order to live wholeheartedly for the God of his fathers." And Morris says of Laban: "Rather than seeking to follow the truth of God's plan as witnessed by Jacob, he merely resented and coveted the blessing of God on Jacob. He finally ended up with neither. His life constitutes a sober warning to a great host of semi-religious but fundamentally self-worshipping and self-seeking men and women today."

So, Rachel and Leah were wrong to look to their father Laban for their portion or inheritance (v.14) once they were married to Jacob. He now was their portion and inheritance.