

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 8

Jacob – Part 2

A friend of mine writes fiction novels as a second career. In fact, he writes the kind I love to read – adventure and spy thrillers! Over lunch one day, I asked him how he became such a good writer. To some degree, he is simply a gifted storyteller, but he also laid out a few principles that his various mentors had taught him over the years. He told me that every story needs a protagonist (the hero), something the hero desperately wants (a quest), a danger faced by the hero, and a robust antagonist (the person we love to hate!). In fact, if my storytelling skills were better, I might have a good head start on a few novels with some of the antagonists I've already encountered in real life!

You probably even know a few yourselves – perhaps a neighbor across the street, a co-worker, or maybe even a boss! For some reason, every interaction always seems to be about them. Perhaps they are greedy, a cheater, a liar, a deceiver, a coward, or all of the above. They often seem to get away with their behavior, and at times, we wonder where God is in bringing justice to the situation, or we rejoice if they are forced to endure some of the same treatment they have given to others. In the quietness of our own heart, we may even be tempted to think the unspeakable – why doesn't God zap them and save us all from our misery because surely they will never change!

Jacob was the perfect antagonist in the real life story revealed in Genesis 25-32. Only four verses into his biography, we see Jacob demonstrating a penchant for manipulating others – revealed by the story of his purchasing Esau's birthright for a bowl of lentil stew! As foolish as we might think Esau's decision, nothing can excuse Jacob for his greed and manipulation. As we also learned last week, this pattern of deception only worsened with Jacob ultimately deceiving even his own father, fleeing for his life to the "safety" of relatives in Paddan-aram, and attempting to cut a deal with God along the way.

JACOB AND LABAN

Genesis 29 picks up with Jacob arriving in Paddan-aram and "finding" his uncle Laban. Although the story relates without much fanfare Jacob's arrival at a well and asking the simple question if the shepherds knew of Laban, it seems clear that God is involved in both the timing and location of what occurred.¹ "Look," the

¹ This story is in contrast to that of Abraham sending his servant to his relatives to obtain a wife for his son Isaac (Gen 24). There, we are told that the servant arrives in the city of Nahor and asks

shepherds said, “Rachel his daughter is coming now with the sheep!” A coincidence? Perhaps. Or, perhaps God was already at work behind the scenes fulfilling the promise made at Bethel that he would be with Jacob.

Word is sent to Laban about Jacob’s arrival, and Laban runs to greet Jacob and bring him home where he stays for the next month. During this time, Jacob apparently worked for Laban for free, such that Laban now asks:

Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be? (Gen. 29:15)

Given the events of the next few years, one is left to wonder if Laban would have allowed a non-kinsman to continue working just for room and board!

At any rate, Jacob is already smitten by the beautiful younger daughter of Laban, Rachel, and so offers to serve Laban for seven years for the right to marry her. We are not told much else about the passing of the seven years, other than that they “seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”

The day arrives with the apparent typical fanfare of a wedding in that time, replete with the gathering of all the people, a feast, and the giving of a female servant (Zilpah) for the bride. However, when the light of morning arrives, Jacob discovers that he has consummated his marriage with Rachel’s older sister Leah, instead of Rachel! Now it was Jacob’s turn to be deceived, and over something very important to him!

What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me? (Gen. 29:25)

Many see in this some just desserts for Jacob; the deceiver is deceived.

Laban’s answer is simple: “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.” Although it is unlikely that Jacob had told Laban of the stealing of Esau’s blessing from Isaac, Laban’s reference to “the younger versus the firstborn” must have brought Jacob’s own deception to mind.

Laban adds that “we” will also give Rachel in marriage to Jacob at the end of Leah’s marriage week, but only in exchange for another seven years of service to Laban! Jacob agrees, but this new arrangement brings its own set of problems! The Scripture simply says “...and he loved Rachel more than Leah...”, but we can almost guess the outcome – competition between Rachel and Leah for Jacob’s affection!

God for favor and success, laying out a series of specific circumstances to help discern the clear leading of God in his quest. God grants the servant’s requests, leading him directly to the relatives of Abraham, and obtaining the hand of Rebekah in marriage for Isaac.

For the first time since leaving Bethel, the camera shifts to reveal things from God's perspective:

When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. (Gen. 29:31)

In a sense, it almost seems unfair to Rachel! Until now we have not been told of any wrong attitudes or actions on the part of either Rachel or Leah, and the Bible is silent as to God's reasoning. What we can conclude from the meaning of the names² Leah gives to each of her children, however, that Leah longed for the love of her husband, which apparently never came – at least to the level she desired.

And so the contest for Jacob's love begins. Leah bears four children (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah), but Rachel's barrenness plagues her, causing her to ultimately demand that Jacob give her children through her female servant, Bilhah. As a result, Rachel is able to claim the two children born to Bilhah (Dan and Naphtali) as her own, and now claims victory over her sister! Not to be left behind by her own inability to bear any more children, Leah gives her servant Zilpah to Jacob resulting in two more children (Gad and Asher). The back-and-forth contest continues with more children (Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah) born to Leah, and finally, one child born directly to Rachel (Joseph).

With the birth of Joseph, Jacob is ready to leave Laban and return home to Canaan and his father. Faced with the loss of his source of wealth, Laban is forced to admit that God had blessed him because of Jacob, and he does not want it to end! Jacob makes an offer of the terms required for him to stay, and for Laban it seemed like a real "no brainer!" On the surface it was a simple arrangement: Jacob would continue to care for Laban's flocks. Laban would own any animals and offspring that were the more common ones (solid-colored sheep and goats, and non-black lambs), while Jacob would own the rarer ones (striped, speckled, and spotted sheep and goats, and black lambs)³. This was a great deal for Laban, or so it seemed! To enhance his position and be certain that Jacob would start from scratch, Laban immediately removed all the existing sheep that should have been Jacob's, gave them to his sons, and took them three days' journey away! This resulted in Jacob starting with a gene pool that favored Laban!

Jacob, however, had a plan of his own. He took fresh sticks of poplar, almond, and plane trees, and peeled back part of the bark to expose the white of the sticks.

² In our culture today we fail to recognize the importance placed on a name, but to those of Jacob's time, a name was inextricably linked to the very character of its bearer.

³ "In the East the goats, as a rule are black or dark-brown, rarely white or spotted with white, and that the sheep for the most part are white, very seldom black or speckled." See Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) v.1 at 187.

Jacob then placed the sticks in the watering troughs where the flocks watered with the intent to produce offspring that were speckled or spotted. The ability of peeled poplar sticks to result in the birth of speckled or spotted animals has been questioned by Bible scholars for many years. One answer to this lies in an examination of the Hebrew word usage, and Jacob's recounting of events to his wives.

First, let's examine the pun. As Jacob peeled back the bark on the sticks he exposed the white underneath. In Hebrew, this white is "לבן", or "laban!" Thus, Jacob played the Laban game with laban sticks and won!⁴ Second, it is clear from Jacob's later conversation⁵ with Leah and Rachel that it was God who brought about the desired offspring that belonged to Jacob and not the white sticks. The laban sticks were a reminder that God was in control. Jacob describes the years of working for Laban including how Laban changed his wages 10 times. Jacob explains how flocks would bear striped animals when his wages were for striped, and spotted animals when his wages were for spotted. Thus, the same white sticks (laban sticks) would produce whatever animals Laban determined were to be Jacob's wages at the time. In placing the laban sticks in front of the breeding animals, it would be natural for Jacob to be reminded that God was the one responding to Laban's dishonesty and righting the wrong.

Sailhamer⁶ articulates a consensus among many scholars in stating the purpose of this story:

The clue to the meaning of the passage is the last verse of the chapter (30:43), where a summary of the whole narrative is given. The summary recalls quite clearly God's blessing of both Abraham (12:16) and Isaac (26:14) and thus puts the event of this chapter within the larger context of the themes developed throughout the book, namely, God's promise of blessing and his faithfulness to that promise. Jacob's wise dealings with Laban then are an example of the way God caused him to prosper during this sojourn. Further confirmation that such is the sense of the narrative comes from the words of Jacob himself in the next chapter. Looking back he told his wives that it was God who had taken Laban's herds and given them to him (31:9).

⁴ Walvoord, John F and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Victor, 1985) at 77.

⁵ See Gen 31:7-9.

⁶ See Sailhamer section in Gaebelein, Frank, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, (Zondervan, 1990), v.2 at 203.

What is humorous, however, is the last verse of chapter 30 describing the ensuing years well – Jacob increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants, male servants, camels, and donkeys! As Laban’s wealth became Jacob’s through the Laban game, Laban’s sons began to grumble and Laban himself no longer regarded Jacob with favor as before. God took this opportunity to tell Jacob it was time to return to his fathers and kindred. But most importantly, God reiterated the promise he had made to Jacob when he appeared to Jacob 20 years earlier – “I will be with you!”

Jacob calls Rachel and Leah into the field with him and relates their new situation to them. Jacob fully recognizes God’s watchful involvement over the years in spite of the many difficulties that he endured at the hand of Laban – wages changed 10 times, consumed by the heat and cold, sleepless nights, and absorbing all losses from theft or wild animals. Rachel and Leah recognize there is no portion or inheritance left for them in Laban’s house, and encourage Jacob to follow God’s instruction to leave.

God had changed Jacob much over the 20 years of deception, greed, and hardship endured under Laban, but Jacob still has some of his old ways. The Bible states simply, “And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee,” when Laban had gone off to shear his sheep. Three days after Jacob leaves, Laban is told of Jacob’s departure and immediately pursues him for the next seven days, ultimately overtaking him in the hill country of Gilead. We can only guess what Laban had planned for their moment of confrontation – but God had other plans. The night before they were to meet, God intervened in a dream to Laban with the stern warning, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.”

Here, we get one more taste of what the previous 20 years must have been like for Jacob – Laban is proud and arrogant, even apparently disregarding God’s warning to say nothing, either good or bad. If Laban did not cross the line of God’s warning, he at least snuggled up to it very closely! One can almost laugh at the irony in Laban’s implied threat to Jacob, “It is in my power to do you harm, but God told me not to say anything to you.” Apparently, Laban recognized it really was not in his power!

One interesting accusation Laban made is that Jacob also stole his household gods, a charge that Jacob vehemently denies. Unaware that Rachel did indeed steal the teraphim, Jacob offers that if the thief is found he would not live! Fortunately for Jacob and Rachel, the gods were not found! Here, Rachel demonstrates her own abilities at lying and deception, effectively concealing the household gods in her

camel's saddle by feigning infirmity. Unger⁷ provides insight into Rachel's apparent reasoning for her theft:

The discoveries at Nuzu SE of Nineveh near modern Kirkuk in 1925-41 have yielded several thousand cuneiform tablets illustrating such patriarchal customs as adoptions, the relationship between Jacob and Laban, marriage, rights of the firstborn, the teraphim. The latter (*i.e. teraphim*) are now known to have been household deities, the possession of which implied family leadership. In the case of a married daughter, they assured the husband of the right to the property of her father. Since Laban evidently had sons of his own when Jacob left for Canaan, they alone had the right to their father's gods. Accordingly, Rachel's stealing the teraphim was a serious offense aimed at preserving for her husband the chief title to Laban's estate.

When Laban fails to find the missing gods, Jacob becomes angry and berates Laban for chasing him and accusing him, even recounting the history of abuse he had received at the hands of Laban for 20 years. The adversity, however, has changed Jacob! He is fully aware that the God of Isaac and Abraham had been on his side the entire time. Even more so, God was aware of Jacob's affliction and labor, and had not forgotten Jacob. Even though Laban does not like the situation, he recognizes that he can do nothing other than to separate from Jacob. They each erect pillars of stones to witness their promise to never cross to the other's territory with the intent to harm the other. Edward Fudge adds a wonderful insight into their departure from one another:

In the end, they separate on terms that are less warm than wary, their relationship summed up in the benediction: "The Lord watch between thee and me when we are absent one from another" (KJV). Often quoted today as an expression of affection, the statement originally means something like: "May the Creator keep an eye on you, you scoundrel, since I will be unable to do that for myself!"⁸

With the departure of Laban, peace had finally come to Jacob. Well, for a few brief moments at least.

⁷ Under, Merrill F., *Unger's Bible Handbook*, (Moody Press, 1966), at 75.

⁸ Fudge, William Edward, "*The Divine Rescue*", (Leafwood, 2010) at 58.

JACOB MEETS ESAU

Leaving his 20 year adventure with Laban behind, Jacob is now forced to confront the future – what will happen when he sees Esau again? Will Esau have forgotten Jacob’s past transgressions? Will Esau be friendly? Or will Esau attempt to kill him as he had sworn 20 years earlier?

In obedience to God, Jacob continues on his way. We are told only briefly about what must have been an incredibly encouraging event – Jacob is met by the angels of God, whereupon Jacob says, “This is God’s camp!” This event is the other “bookend” to Jacob’s 20 years away from home. The expression “the angels of God” occurs only in 28:12 at the time of Jacob’s initial departure, and again in 32:1 when Jacob returns. The former encounter Jacob called “the gate of heaven” and the latter he named “the camp of God.” By revealing the angels to Jacob the second time, God visibly reminded Jacob of his initial promise to be with Jacob during Jacob’s 20 years away. This visible evidence of God’s role in Jacob’s path must have encouraged Jacob about the upcoming meeting with Esau.

Jacob sends messengers ahead to tell Esau he is coming with the hope of finding favor in Esau’s sight. But the messengers return with what appears to be the opposite welcome – Esau is coming with 400 men to meet Jacob! Afraid, distressed, worried, Jacob divides his people and possessions, hoping that at least half of them will escape alive.

What to do? Jacob cannot go back to Laban, and he cannot go forward! There is no place else to turn, and no one to help him. In desperation, Jacob turns to the One who has faithfully walked beside him for the past 20 years. “Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ ” Jacob clings to God and God’s promise that He will do him good!

Jacob develops a new plan to deal with the approaching Esau – if words of servitude will not work perhaps gifts will! So, Jacob creates a series of five gifts of animals from his herds to send ahead to Esau:

200 female goats + 20 male goats
200 ewes + 20 rams
30 milking camels and their calves
40 cows + 10 bulls
20 female donkeys + 10 male donkeys

Over 580 animals – this was a group of animals meant to make a man wealthy! Jacob’s plan is to send each drove of animals separately and with a space in

between them, and each drove will have its own messengers. As each drove reaches Esau, the messenger is to say, “They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.” Imagine your reaction if you were Esau as the first gift and message arrives, then another, and another, and another, and another! Jacob clearly wanted to appease Esau!

In a final precaution for the night, Jacob took his wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children⁹ and sent them across the stream, leaving himself alone. Alone and vulnerable – exactly where he needed to be to experience God in a life-changing way. Unbeknownst to Jacob, it is time to rumble!

We are told simply, “And a man wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of the day.” Who was the ‘man’ and where did he come from? The passage tells us little at this point, but we can surmise that the wrestling match was intense! They wrestled through the remainder of the night and when the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he simply touched Jacob’s hip and instantly put the strongest sinew in the body of a wrestler out of commission. Perhaps, this is the point at which Jacob realizes that this is a supernatural encounter, for we know he certainly declares it just two verses later¹⁰!

The man insists that Jacob let him go, but even though injured and tired, Jacob refuses until his adversary blesses him. The moment of truth arrives, but instead of blessing Jacob, the man asks Jacob a question, “What is your name?” Jacob is confronted one last time with the character of his shameful past – deceiver, supplanter, and cheater. However, this time it is before God. As if accepting the confession, the man tells Jacob, “No longer will you be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed¹¹.”

⁹ Jacob had twelve children (11 boys plus Dinah) at this time, and we are left to speculate whether one was left behind or if, more likely, Dinah was simply not included in the count because she was not a male.

¹⁰ Gen 32:30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.”

¹¹ Other scholars translate this “You have struggled with God, and with men have you succeeded”, based in part on the LXX (“Since you have been strong against God, so you will triumph over men.”) and the Vulgate (“Because you have been strong against God, in the same manner you will prevail against men with great strength.”). In both the LXX and Vulgate, Jacob’s exhibition of strength against God is a token of his success against humankind. See, Hamilton, Victor P., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans, 1995) at 335.

So, did Jacob wrestle with God or an angel? Was this the pre-incarnate Christ as some postulate? Sailhamer describes one common assessment by scholars:¹²

Jacob said, “I saw God face to face.” Jacob’s remark did not necessarily mean that the “man” with whom he wrestled was in fact God. Rather, as with other similar statements (e.g. Judges 13:22), when one saw the “angel of the Lord,” it was appropriate to say that he had seen the face of God (but cf. Hos 12:2-4).

Regardless of whom it was that Jacob wrestled, Jacob was a changed man – both spiritually and physically. He carried a new name – Israel, “God fights.”¹³ He carried a new found trust in the God who cared for him, and he carried with him a limp as a physical reminder of the encounter.

As Jacob limps away from the place he calls Peniel (“face of God”), Jacob looks up and sees something else – Esau and his 400 men. This time, though, he steps to the front of the line, putting his family after him. Jacob is now their protector, and God is his. First, he places his female servants with their children, followed by Leah with her children, and lastly Rachel and Joseph. Jacob humbles himself before Esau, bowing seven times with his face almost touching the ground. Will Esau welcome him, or fulfill his previous pledge to kill Jacob?

Apparently, God had been at work in Esau’s life as well, for Esau runs to Jacob, embraces and kisses him, and together they weep. All is well between Esau and Jacob. Esau tries to refuse the gifts of animals that Jacob had sent to meet Esau, but Jacob insists until Esau accepts them.

We are left, however, with one perplexing interchange between the two at the end of their reunion. Esau offers to escort Jacob back to Seir with him, but Jacob refuses. Esau then offers to leave behind some of his men to assist Jacob, but Jacob refuses that as well. Instead, Jacob tells Esau to go ahead and he will follow slowly behind until they both arrive in Seir. Apparently, Jacob is not a completely changed man for instead of continuing to Seir, he heads in a completely different direction first to Succoth, and later to Shechem. This deception and detour to Shechem puts Jacob’s family in a place where Dinah’s safety and purity are later violated – a place they should never have been.

It is only after the disaster at Shechem that Jacob removes all the foreign gods from his house and fulfills his vow of 20-plus years earlier to return to Bethel to

¹² See Sailhamer section in Gaebelien, Frank, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Zondervan, 1990), v.2 at 210.

¹³ The meaning of Israel is not absolutely clear. Other interpretations may typically be classified in the groupings of “Strives with God,” “God strives,” “God is just/straight/upright.”

make it God's house. It is only when Jacob finally gets to Bethel that God appears to him again, reiterating the promises he had made to Jacob previously at Bethel. Even with the passage of time and the detour through Shechem, God has not forgotten Jacob – and God has not forgotten you.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Thomas Langford of Duke Divinity School aptly spoke at a lecture¹⁴ about our friend Jacob:

We could see Jacob as a cheat, a liar, a greedy man, a con man, and a coward. What God would choose such a man to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel? The answer, of course, is that only a God of grace and mercy would choose Jacob. And the truth is that every one of us is Jacob. We are all liars, cheats, cowards. We are all chosen only by the grace and mercy of God.

The even better news is that God does not just choose us and leave us in our broken condition. He is in the business of healing and changing lives. Moment by moment, God fashions us into His likeness – sometimes in ways we can see and sometimes in ways we can not see, but He is always working – and He is always working for our good.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Gen. 32:27-28).*

No person is beyond the reach of God, yet each must face his own crisis point when, stripped of all defenses, he must choose God or self. Before you is a loving, caring Savior who wants to redeem you and change you into his likeness. No one else can choose for you. Choose wisely.

2. *“What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (Gen. 29:25).*

Being involved with difficult people is just a normal part of life. It may not be the most pleasant experience, but it is often the one that God uses to make us more like Christ.

Count it all joy, my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces

¹⁴ Broyles, Craig C., *Interpreting the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2001) at 263.

steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Remember that while God is using them in your life, he is also using you in THEIR lives to bring them to himself.

3. *“And Jacob came again to Bethel...and there he built an altar...because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother... And God said to him, ‘A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.’”* (Gen 35:6-12).

God is faithful. He has not forgotten you. If God seems to be absent from your life, then it is likely that you are the one who moved. He is still standing by, waiting for you to return. So confess, remove the foreign gods from your life, and return to the life God has richly prepared for you.

WANT MORE?

Read Genesis 34, 38, and 43:29 – 44:34 to better understand Simeon, Levi and Judah’s bad behavior (note these are R-rated stories!). Then email me to share your thoughts as to what SHOULD have been done to avenge the case of Dinah in chapter 34.