

## Chapter 10: The Dispute of Jacob

*Genesis 31:22–55*

This world is not friendly to God’s people. Because this world hates God, the world also hates us. The world has raged in war against God and God’s anointed since the beginning: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his anointed...” (Ps. 2:1–2). As Jesus prepared to endure the rage of the world at the cross, he warned his disciples that they would suffer the same kind of treatment from the world: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). In the midst of the world’s rage, what can God’s people do? Furthermore, why does God seem to allow our enemies so many opportunities to rage against us? How far will the hatred of the world go against us?

God does not overlook even the smallest detail in his providential care for us. Even when our enemies rage against us, and even when God allows our pursuing enemies to overtake us, God has a plan for our good. This does not mean that what we suffer at the hands of our enemies is *good* in itself. Instead, this means that God will not permit us to suffer beyond the limitations he has appointed. Furthermore, this means that even through great evil, God will be working together that evil for the ultimate good of his people. It is when our circumstances seem utterly hopeless that God intervenes most gloriously. In Jacob’s flight from Laban in Genesis 31:22–55, we see an encouraging reminder that *God conquers the enemies of his people at the darkest hour*.

### **The Rage of God’s Enemies (Gen. 31:22–32)**

Because Jacob “stole the heart of Laban” (ESV: “tricked”; Gen. 31:20), Jacob gains a three-day head start before his father-in-law discovers what has happened. When Laban does hear that Jacob, Jacob’s wives, Jacob’s little ones, and Jacob’s flocks have departed from Paddan-aram, Laban immediately gives pursuit:

[22] When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, [23] he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. [24] But 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.”

[25] And 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. (Gen. 31:22–25)

Jacob also takes advantage of Laban’s intense workload during sheep-shearing season (Gen. 31:19), which required the full attention and manpower of ancient shepherds.<sup>1</sup> It was Laban, however, who originally isolated Jacob at a distance of a three-days’ journey (Gen. 30:36), and Jacob now takes

advantage of this distance to give himself and his family a head-start.<sup>2</sup> Although Jacob was justified to depart from Canaan, and although Jacob went according to the word of God (Gen. 31:3, 13), we see the reason that the narrator describes this event as *stealing* Laban's heart rather than as a mere departure. In English, we might say that Jacob *steals away* in secret.

### The Pursuit of Laban

Laban's pursuit of Jacob has two important parallel passages that we should notice. First, Laban takes "his kinsmen" with him to pursue Jacob (Gen. 31:23). This is very similar to the way that Abram led forth his 318 trained men, born in his house, to pursue the Mesopotamian armies to rescue Lot (Gen. 14:14, 15).<sup>3</sup> Abram pursued the Mesopotamian armies after hearing that they had taken Lot *captive* (Gen. 14:14), and Laban uses the same verb to accuse Jacob of taking his daughters and grandchildren *captive* by the sword (Gen. 31:26).<sup>4</sup> The difference between these two passages, then, lies in the direction of movement. Abram *pursued* the Mesopotamian armies as they headed *away* from the land of Canaan, and the narrative uses the same verb to describe how Laban *pursues* Jacob as Jacob heads out of Mesopotamia and *toward* Canaan. Furthermore, while Abram pursued the Mesopotamians to deliver Lot from his captivity, the Mesopotamian Laban pursues Jacob to return Jacob's family to captivity.

The second passage is even more important: Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites to, and even into, the Red Sea (Ex. 14). The same word to describe Laban's *pursuit* (Gen. 31:22) appears five times to describe Pharaoh's *pursuit* (Ex. 14:4, 8, 9, 23; 15:9). Furthermore, the same word to describe how Laban *overtook* Jacob (Gen. 31:25) describes how Pharaoh and his armies *overtook* the Israelites at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:9; 15:9).<sup>5</sup> More importantly, this fits the general typology that we have been observing since Genesis 30:25, where we have discovered several correlations between Jacob's departure from his house of slavery with Laban and the exodus of Israel out of their house of slavery in Egypt. The narrator of Jacob's exodus from Laban's household tells the story in such a way to make explicit that God worked in the same way to deliver his people in both situations. When we read both stories, we know that this is the part of the story where God gains victory over the enemies of his people. Laban, however, will not experience the humiliating, crushing defeat that Pharaoh does, for Laban obeys God's command not to harm his people—to some degree, at least (cf. Gen. 31:29, 43). By contrast, the Lord hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and the Egyptians so that they made one last, rebellious attempt to harm God's people. Through this, God got the glory over Egypt through his judgment against their wickedness (Ex. 14:17–18, 30–31). God, then, will give Jacob victory over Laban, but the victory will not be quite as dramatic because Laban's heart is not quite as hard as Pharaoh's.

There may be even a little more to connect the story of Jacob's flight from Laban and Israel's flight from Egypt. In the last verse of the previous passage, Jacob and his family crossed over a body of water, the Euphrates River (Gen. 31:21). Importantly, the Euphrates River was the eastern boundary of the entirety of the Promised Land that God promised to give to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 15:18).<sup>6</sup> To cross over the Euphrates means that Jacob has re-entered the Promised Land, even he is still not quite yet in the land of Canaan. (The land of Canaan is a subset of the broader region of the Promised Land; cf. Gen. 15:18–21.) The *western* boundary of the Promised Land is the "river of Egypt" (Gen. 15:18), which is difficult to identify, except that it has something to do with Egypt.<sup>7</sup> The river of Egypt cannot be the Red Sea, since the after crossing

the Red Sea, the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years before entering into the Promised Land. Nevertheless, in both cases the enemies of God's people pursue God's people *toward* the boundary of the Promised Land. Later, it will be the Israelites who pursue their enemies by crossing the Jordan River to enter into the land of Canaan as they begin their conquest (Josh. 3–4). Even today, God still brings his people into their inheritance and beyond the reach of their enemies by causing them to pass through waters in baptism (1 Pet. 3:18–22).

### Laban's Dream

Regardless of whether we can press these correlations to the extreme, it is clear that Laban's pursuit and overtaking of Jacob foreshadows Pharaoh's pursuit and overtaking of the Israelites at the Red Sea. God indeed gains victory over Laban, but not with the same cataclysmic judgment that he displays at the Red Sea against the Egyptian armies. This time, God warns Laban in a dream against taking any kind of violent action against God's people. More literally, we might translate the phrase "Be careful" (ESV) as "*Keep yourself*" (Gen. 31:24). At Bethel, God used the same word for *keep* in his promise to Jacob: "Behold, 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" (Gen. 28:15).<sup>8</sup> God is still working to fulfill his promise to *keep* (that is, to guard/protect/watch over) Jacob as he brings Jacob back into the land. Just as God appeared to Abimelech in a dream to keep the Philistine from retaliating against Abraham (Gen. 20:3–7), so now God appears in a dream to keep Laban from retaliating against Jacob.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Abimelech, Laban can make no objection of his own innocence before God.<sup>10</sup>

Through this dream, God instructs Laban to *keep* himself from speaking anything "good or bad" to Jacob. In this, God is echoing Laban's own words when Abraham's servant sought to take Laban's sister, Rebekah, back to Canaan to become the wife of Isaac. After hearing the servant tell about God's clear providence in leading him to Rebekah (Gen. 24:34–49), Laban exclaimed, "This thing has come from the LORD; we cannot speak to you bad or good" (Gen. 24:50). J. P. Fokkelman writes, "What Laban saw in Gen. 24 willingly and of his own accord, must now be impressed upon him threateningly by God."<sup>11</sup> God's prohibition does not restrict Laban from saying *anything at all* to Jacob, but only that Laban is forbidden from taking any action against Jacob, even if he feels that he has a "legitimate grievance."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, when Laban later claims that he has the power to do Jacob harm (Gen. 31:29), we know that he is making an "empty boast."<sup>13</sup>

### Laban's Complaint

When Laban does overtake Jacob, he lays out his complaint against the way that Jacob has departed in stealth:

[26] And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? [27] Why 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? [28] And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. [29] It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.' [30] And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?" (Gen. 31:26–30)

Laban's speech is a confused mess of emotion: "This speech is a psychological portrait of thirteen sentences, in which rage and resignation, castigation and sweetness contend for mastery and eventually achieve an unstable equilibrium."<sup>14</sup> Laban begins on the most ironic of all possible notes, demanding of Jacob, "What have you done?" (Gen. 31:26). This is the question on the lips of many accusers in the book of Genesis (cf. Gen. 3:13; 4:10; 12:18; 20:9; 26:10), but most importantly, this is the question that Jacob posed to Laban when he discovered Leah in his bed the morning after he thought he married Rachel (Gen. 29:25).<sup>15</sup> Right from Laban's first words, we hear the desperate, self-righteous complaint of a man who has forfeited the moral high ground thirteen years ago.

In the last passage, the narrator contrasted how Rachel *stole* Laban's household gods while Jacob *stole* Laban's heart (Gen. 31:19–20). Laban begins and ends his speech with an accusation of *stealing*: "What have you done, that *you have tricked me* [lit., "stolen my heart"]...Why did you flee secretly and *trick me* [lit., "stole me"]...but why did you *steal my gods*?" (Gen. 31:26, 27, 30). This is important, as Fokkelman observes, because Jacob earlier insisted that he would not *steal* any goats or sheep from Laban (Gen. 30:33), and he will continue to insist that he has *stolen* nothing from Laban (Gen. 31:39).<sup>16</sup> Laban insists that Jacob has *stolen* something from him, but Jacob insists that his service to Laban has been above reproach.

The middle of the speech is where we see the chaotic state of Laban's mind most clearly. In one breath, he laments his inability to send Jacob away with "mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre," lamenting that he was not able to kiss "my sons and my daughters farewell" (Gen. 31:27–28); in the next breath, Laban threatens that "It is in my power to do you harm" (Gen. 31:29). Even so, Laban begrudgingly admits that "the God of your father" has forbidden him from *actually* doing any harm to Jacob (Gen. 31:29). By speaking of "the God of your father," Laban seems to be acknowledging a different deity than the one(s) he worships *and* the covenantal blessings that God has demonstrated toward Jacob these last twenty years.<sup>17</sup> Then, before making his last accusation of theft, Laban then seems to acknowledge Jacob's own homesickness for his father's house (Gen. 31:30). Without question, Laban is feeling the weight of many emotions in his last encounter with Jacob, his daughters, and his grandchildren. On the whole, "the attitudes of hurt father and baffled avenger hardly went together, and, by fulminating on what he would have done if God had not called him off, he only conveyed reassurance to Jacob."<sup>18</sup>

### Jacob's Defense

It is Laban's last accusation that sets up the main drama of this story: "but why did you steal my gods?" (Gen. 31:30). Jacob first responds to Laban's questions about why he *stole* Laban's heart by escaping secretly, and then to Laban's question about *stealing* his gods:

[31] Jacob answered and said to Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. [32] Anyone 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. (Gen. 31:31–32)

Jacob does not so much attempt to *justify* his secret departure as to *explain* it. Jacob simply states that he was afraid that Laban might imprison him and his wives by force, rather than arguing that he was

necessarily in the right to do so.<sup>19</sup> While this is probably true to some extent, Jacob here echoes the excuses of Adam in the garden of Eden: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and *I was afraid*, because I was naked, and I hid myself” (Gen. 3:10).<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, we have seen Jacob grow tremendously through the sanctification of his suffering over the last twenty years. On the other hand, Jacob still deals with besetting sins and character flaws.<sup>21</sup> The progress of his sanctification, then, looks much like ours.

More frighteningly, Jacob makes a rash oath that anyone found with Laban’s gods shall be put to death, for Jacob does not know that Rachel stole them (Gen. 31:32). As when Jephthah rashly swears to sacrifice his own daughter (Judg. 11:29–40), and as when Saul rashly swears to execute his son Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:24–46), Jacob rashly swears to put Rachel to death.<sup>22</sup> Fokkelman well summarizes the dramatic irony contained in Jacob’s words: “We know who the true thief is, and we are seized with terror as we see Jacob, in a fit of honest indignation, fix a death-penalty for the one found guilty. The fool, little does he know that he signs the death-sentence of his favourite wife!”<sup>23</sup> Jacob does not realize it, but this is a dark moment. Unless God intervenes, Rachel will die.

### The Result of God’s Victory (Gen. 31:33–42)

Upon receiving Jacob’s permission, Laban immediately begins an investigation to recover his stolen household gods:

[33] So 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. [34] Now 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. [35] 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. (Gen. 31:33–35)

Unsurprisingly, Laban begins his search in the tent of his primary suspect, Jacob.<sup>24</sup> The dramatic tension grows as Laban enters into Leah’s tent first, then into the tent of the two female servants, and, finally into Rachel’s tent. Jacob will later follow nearly the same order of exposure when he divides up his family to meet Esau, wave by wave: first Jacob, then the two servants and their children, then Leah and her children, and finally Rachel and Joseph (Gen. 33:1–3).

When Laban enters into Rachel’s tent, the narrative echoes the story of how Jacob deceived his father, Isaac, to steal the blessing. Here, Laban *feels* all around the tent, but is unable to discover the truth. The same verb for *feels* appeared when Isaac sought to identify his son: “Then Isaac said to Jacob, ‘Please come near, that *I may feel you*, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not’” (Gen. 27:21, 22).<sup>25</sup> Just as Jacob deceived Isaac’s sense of touch, so Laban’s sense of touch is deceived. This time, however, Jacob is entirely ignorant of the deception; Rachel, not Jacob, engages in deceit of her father. Just as Rebekah crafted a plan to deceive Isaac, so Rachel crafts her own plan to deceive her father.<sup>26</sup> Shockingly, Rachel hides them underneath her and claims to be unable to rise because of menstruation (Gen. 31:35). This is an astonishing statement about idols: “Not only can one sit on gods, but such gods can be rendered unclean if they are stained by Rachel’s blood.”<sup>27</sup> As Fokkelman writes, “This means that they [the idols] are as unclean as can be, in this new position

they come near functioning as...sanitary towels.”<sup>28</sup> It does seem likely that Rachel has stolen these gods for religious reasons—in part, at least. Nevertheless, in this scene she acts out “Israel’s contempt for false gods—they are as unclean as can be.”<sup>29</sup>

### Jacob’s Dispute

After the investigation is over, Laban’s has no evidence to support his charge of theft. When Laban cannot produce the stolen gods, Jacob vents his frustration over yet one more affront from his father-in-law:

[36] Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, “What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? [37] For 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. [38] 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. [39] What 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. [40] There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. [41] These 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. [42] 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 labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.” (Gen. 31:36–42)

The word translated here as “berated” (Gen. 31:36) has appeared in two previous scenes in the book of Genesis: first to describe the “strife” between the herdsmen of Abram and the herdsmen of Lot (Gen. 13:7–8), and second to describe the “quarrel” between Isaac and the men of Gerar over the possession and use of Abraham’s wells (Gen. 26:20–22).<sup>30</sup> This word can sometimes describe a formal lawsuit, but in each of these scenes we seem to have more of an informal dispute than any formal legal proceedings.<sup>31</sup> More importantly, Jacob once again experiences something that his father and his grandfather have already gone through. God extends the same blessings to each generation of the patriarchs, and he also sanctifies each generation of patriarchs with the same kinds of suffering.

First, Jacob demands that Laban prove the charges that he has brought against him after “hotly pursuing” him (Gen. 31:36). If there is any evidence to substantiate his claims, Jacob urges Laban to present that evidence before their kinsmen as judges (Gen. 31:37). Second, Jacob defends his own great faithfulness toward Laban throughout their relationship of “twenty years” (Gen. 31:38). Jacob starts by pointing out that the “ewes” and female goats did not miscarry. The word “ewe” is *rachel*, the name of Laban’s daughter and Jacob’s wife: “For twenty years Jacob has indeed cared for Laban’s ‘Rachels,’ all his ‘rachels’ and his one ‘Rachel.’”<sup>32</sup> Also, Jacob did not steal from Laban by eating any of the rams of Laban’s flocks (Gen. 31:38).

Furthermore, Jacob personally bore the loss of any animals that were killed by wild beasts, for Laban required Jacob to account for those animals, “whether stolen by day or stolen by night” (Gen. 31:39). Whether in the scorching heat of day, or the freezing cold of night, Jacob faithfully kept

Laban's flocks (Gen. 31:40). Jacob's shepherding foreshadows the faithfulness of his descendant David, who fought lions and bears to rescue his sheep from their clutches (1 Sam. 16:34–36). Even more, Jacob's shepherding foreshadows the greater faithfulness of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who willingly lays down his life for his sheep to protect them from wolves (John 10:11–15). While Jacob still has flaws, we see a dramatic difference here from the man who emerged from Canaan twenty years earlier: "Jacob has been toughened up away from home. The soft homebound pet of Rebekah has been hardened; the smooth young man who fled from his hairy open-air brother is now much more of a match for Esau."<sup>33</sup>

Third, Jacob complains that over those same twenty years when he was so faithful, Laban was consistently unfaithful: "you have changed my wages ten times" (Gen. 31:41). Twice Laban offered Jacob the opportunity to name his own wages (Gen. 29:15; 30:28) only to change the agreement, manipulate Jacob, and steal from him. In fact, Laban stated expressly that he did not want to Jacob to serve him "for nothing" (Gen. 29:15), but Jacob has now come to understand that Laban would have been happy to send him "away empty-handed" (Gen. 31:42).<sup>34</sup> Jacob has acted righteously in his dealings with Laban, while Laban has miserably oppressed him.

Fourth, Jacob explains the reason he has triumphed, despite Laban's best efforts: "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 labor of my hands and rebuked you last night" (Gen. 31:42). Laban did his best to harm Jacob, but God overrode Laban's efforts, protecting Jacob through everything. In this way, Jacob's words here anticipate Joseph's words to his brothers who treat him cruelly by selling him into slavery: "And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5).<sup>35</sup> On the surface, it may have appeared that Laban had the upper hand these past twenty years; however, God has been faithfully working out *his* plan during this time to bless and protect Jacob. By "the Fear of Isaac," Jacob most likely means "the One of Isaac who inspires dread" rather than "the One whom Isaac dreads."<sup>36</sup> That is, Jacob knows that the God of his father has turned the tables against Laban.

### Jacob's Exodus

Gordon Wenham observes that this passage is filled with words that anticipate the exodus.<sup>37</sup> First, when Jacob says that Laban would have been willing to *send him away* empty-handed, the verb for "send away" is the most common word to describe how Pharaoh must *let God's people go* (cf. Gen. 30:25). Second, Moses uses the same word that Jacob does to assure the Israelites that God will not allow them to leave Egypt "empty-handed" (Ex. 3:21). Third, Jacob insists that "God *saw* my affliction" (Gen. 31:42) and the Lord himself insists that "I have surely *seen* the affliction of my people who are in Egypt" (Ex. 3:7; cf. Ex. 2:25; 3:17; 4:31). Fourth, Jacob's description of "the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac" sounds very similar to description of God in the Exodus, albeit with the additional description that Yahweh is also the God of Jacob: e.g., "And he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'" (Ex. 3:6). The same God who liberated Jacob from his bondage under Laban will later deliver Jacob's descendants from their bondage under Pharaoh in Egypt.

## The Response of God's People (Gen. 31:43–55)

Laban knows that he has no cards left to play. With one last expression of anger and bitterness for having lost control over his circumstances (Gen. 31:43), Laban begrudgingly proposes a covenant with Jacob:<sup>38</sup>

[43] 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 this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? [44] Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” [45] So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. [46] And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. [47] Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. [48] Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it Galeed, [49] and Mizpah, for he said, “The LORD watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight. [50] If 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.” (Gen. 31:43–50)

With the sudden change of heart toward Jacob, Laban follows the example of the Philistines at Gerar in their dealings with Abraham (Gen. 21:22–23) and with Isaac (Gen. 26:12–33).<sup>39</sup> After conflict with both Abraham and Isaac, Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, seeks out a covenant with both Abraham and Isaac to secure the peace. His reason both times is simple: “God is *with* you in all that you do” (Gen. 21:22), and “We see plainly that the LORD has been with you” (Gen. 26:28). The Lord was *with* Abraham and Isaac to secure peace in the midst of their enemies, and now the Lord has been *with* Jacob to secure peace with *his* enemy, Laban.

### Laban's Humiliation

For Laban, this is a stunning reversal. The man who has cheated Jacob for the last twenty years by speaking ambiguously and noncommittally, “now urgently demands the security, the certainty of an accurate, specific agreement, sealed by an oath.”<sup>40</sup> By seeking this covenant, Laban is admitting his inferiority and powerlessness in the face of Jacob and Jacob’s God.<sup>41</sup> For Jacob, this is an opportunity to give this chapter of his life some closure. That is, this is an object lesson “in favour of faith against panic (‘I was afraid’, 31), and of open dealing against scheming, in handling a difficult relationship. Laban was unchanged; but this time Jacob was not leaving behind him ‘a brother offended.’”<sup>42</sup> Jacob fled Canaan after deceiving his father and cheating his brother, and he attempted to flee from Laban, too. This time, Jacob will tie up his loose ends before moving on.

### Jacob's Gratitude

Just as Jacob set up a pillar at Bethel to commemorate that God was with him in that place *and* would continue to go with him on his journey (Gen. 28:18), Jacob now sets up another pillar. For Laban, this pile of stones functions as a witness of the agreement he has struck with Jacob (Gen. 31:48–50).<sup>43</sup> That is, Laban sees the pillar as his last resort of protection on behalf of his daughters. It is ironic, of course, that Laban would make Jacob swear not to take other daughters (Gen. 31:50),



since *he* was the one who deceived Jacob into marrying both of his daughters.<sup>44</sup> Jacob's reasons for swearing this covenant, however, seem different from Laban's. He knows that God has been, and will continue to be, with him. As Jacob responded to God's overwhelming generosity toward him by setting up a pillar Bethel, Jacob now establishes another pillar to memorialize the fact that God has brought him through this difficult time.<sup>45</sup> Jacob's pillar at Bethel looked forward to what God would do in the future; Jacob's pillar here looks back on what God has done over the past twenty years.

### The Covenant Resolution

With that, the two finalize the covenant and make preparations to go their separate ways:

[51] Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. [52] This 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. [53] 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, [54] and 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.

[55] Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home. (Gen. 31:51–55)

When Laban speaks of "the God of Nahor, the God of their father" he is not speaking about the "God of Abraham" in a different way. That is, Laban is swearing by at least two gods—the God of Abraham *and* the God of Nahor, the God of their father.<sup>46</sup> We should remember that the father of Abraham and Nahor worshiped false gods (Josh. 24:2). Perhaps these are the helpless gods that Rachel has stolen from Laban! Jacob, on the other hand, swears by only one God: "the fear of his father Isaac." Then, the two seal the covenant with a meal: "The covenant feast, being sacrificial, was intended to create more than a merely social bond between the parties, who would regard themselves as bound together in the table-fellowship of their divine host."<sup>47</sup> The covenant is struck, and the two are bound to its terms moving forward. Jacob will protect Laban's daughters, and Laban will no longer do harm to Jacob.

Early the next morning, Laban arises, kisses his grandchildren and daughters, and blesses them. At least part of Laban's initial complaint against Jacob, then, was genuine and truthful (Gen. 31:55). Even so, this last meeting between Jacob and Laban contrasts starkly with their first, when Laban "ran to meet [Jacob] and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house" (Gen. 29:13).<sup>48</sup> Much has transpired since that first encounter. Through it all, however, God has kept his promises in faithfulness to Jacob.

### Discussion Questions

1. Why does the world persistently rage against God (Ps. 2)? Why does the world rage against Jesus, and against those who believe in Jesus (John 15:18–16:4)? Why does Laban rage against Jacob? Where do you see the world raging against you? Why does this happen? Why does God so frequently remind us of the world's rage throughout the Scriptures?

2. Why does God allow Laban to overtake Jacob on his way into the Promised Land (Gen. 31:25)? Why does God allow Pharaoh to overtake the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land (Ex. 14:9)? Where have your enemies overtaken you on *your* way to the Promised Land? Why can we not ever arrive in safety in this life? What do we do until we enter our rest?

3. Does the rage of Laban against Jacob catch God off-guard? Does the rage of Pharaoh against the Israelites catch God off-guard? Does the rage of your enemies catch God off-guard? Is it true that God sees the affliction of his people (Gen. 31:42; cf. Ex. 3:7)? Does he see *your* affliction? How might you live differently if you were confident that God saw your affliction?

4. What is Laban's driving concern in establishing a covenant with Jacob (Gen. 31:44, 48–53)? What is Jacob's concern as he makes a covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:45–46, 53–54; cf. Gen. 28:18–22)? Where do we find our true security? Should we still take wise, prudent measures? How do we live *in* the world, while refusing to seek confidence *from* the world?

## Notes

1. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 299.
2. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 164.
3. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 299.
4. Both passages use the root verb שָׁבַח. In Genesis 14:14, the word is נִשְׁבַּח, a Niphal Perfect Tense verb. In Genesis 31:26, the word is כִּשְׁבָיוֹת, a Qal Passive Participle.
5. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 523.
6. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 171–72. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ix.i.html>>
7. Sailhamer argues that the similar boundary markers between Genesis 15:18 and Genesis 2:10–14 suggest that (1) the land of Canaan is the original location of the garden of Eden, and (2) the river of Egypt may be identified with the (also unidentified) “Gihon River” (Gen. 2:13). (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 99.)
8. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 523.
9. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 299.
10. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 523.
11. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 165.
12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 299.
13. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 531.
14. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 167.
15. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 275.
16. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 168.
17. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 525.
18. Kidner, *Genesis*, 177.
19. “He briefly refutes each head of the accusation: with respect to his secret departure, he modestly excuses himself, as having been afraid that he might be deprived of his wives. And in this way he takes part of the blame to himself, deeming it sufficient to exonerate himself from the malice of which he was thought to be guilty. He does not dispute, as a casuist, whether it was lawful to depart by stealth; but leaves it undetermined whether or not his fear was culpable. Let all the children of God learn to imitate this modesty, lest through an

immoderate desire to vindicate their own reputation, they should rush into contentions: just as we have seen many raise tragic scenes out of nothing, because they will not endure that any censure, however trifling, should be cast upon them. Jacob, therefore, was content with this excuse, that he had done nothing wickedly.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 174. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ix.i.html>>)

20. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 301.

21. Walton makes this point, but he overstates his case when he writes that Jacob “has not yet learned his lesson—he is still a deceiver....It does not bode well for a successful return to Canaan if the Jacob who returns is unchanged from the one who left twenty years earlier.” On the contrary, Jacob *is* a changed man, even if he is not *fully* transformed. (Walton, *Genesis*, 594.)

22. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 526.

23. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 169.

24. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 526.

25. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 170.

26. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 532.

27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 303.

28. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 170.

29. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 532.

30. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 305.

31. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 277.

32. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 306.

33. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 277.

34. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 179.

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 278.

36. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 310.

37. All of the examples in this paragraph come from Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 277–78.

38. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 530–31.

39. Kidner, *Genesis*, 178.

40. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 188–89.

41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 279.

42. Kidner, *Genesis*, 178.

43. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 314.

44. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 181. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.ix.i.html>>

45. “What Laban, however, has missed, as Jacob has not, is the ‘Jacobite’ meaning of the *massebe*. To Laban it symbolizes God’s patronage of the non-aggression pact; to Jacob the *massebe* means much more, a symbolization of the God of Bethel, of the Yahweh who intervenes actively and who saves him. This is the thought behind Jacob’s actions in v. 45; this is what he wants to express, grateful as he is, by setting up the *massebe*. This monument is the everlasting confession in stone of a man released from servitude. Laban is bent on the negative: via an alliteration he equates *maššebā* with *mišpā* ‘watchpost’, God must be a watchman (v. 49) against something he is afraid of ‘in case we are hidden [again a negative word] from each other’. Jacob has thoughts of his own on the *massebe*, he is bent on the positive: ‘God saw my affliction and has done me justice.’” (Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 190.)

46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 280–81.

47. Kidner, *Genesis*, 178.

48. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 317.