

-Save This Page as a PDF-

Laban Pursues Jacob

31: 22-42

Laban pursues Jacob DIG: What was Laban's fear regarding the household gods? Why did Laban sing a different tune once he confronted Jacob? Why does Ya'akov react the way he does? How did Jacob inadvertently put Rachel's life in danger?

REFLECT: Are you blameless in all your business dealings? How do you react when you have been accused unjustly?

Laban was busy shearing sheep and the festivities that went along with that annual event. For shepherds, it was the busiest time of the year. **On the third day** after he had left, **Laban was told that Jacob** (Hebrew: **Ya'akov**) **had fled (31:22)**. This three day separation was **Laban's** own choosing, and I am sure **he** realized this when **he** heard **that Jacob had fled**. That made **Laban** and **his sons** furious, but **they** could not just drop everything and leave because that might cost **him** more money. So by the time **they** were ready to leave, probably another couple **days** had passed.



Taking his sons with him, Laban pushed hard **for seven days**. No doubt **he** brought with **him** a considerable force. Covering over forty miles a day, **they** intended to bring back the fugitives by force if necessary. **They** were angry, determined, and **they** were not going to let **Jacob** take **their** flocks to Canaan. If **he** resisted, **his** blood would be on **his** own hands. **They** finally **caught up with**

him in the hill country of Gilead (31:23). Jacob had also pitched his tent there when Laban overtook him. Knowing that **Jacob and his wives and children** couldn't escape, **and** being very tired, **Laban and his sons camped there, too (31:25).** If there was going to be a confrontation the next day, **they** needed **their** rest.

But **Laban** had to deal with someone who was more powerful than **Jacob**. That **night, God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream!** Twenty years earlier at Bethel, **ADONAI, God** promised **Jacob** that **He** would **be with him**, that **He** would watch over **him** and **bring him back to** the Promised **Land** of Canaan (**28:15**). **Laban** got the unmistakable message that **he** was not to harm **Ya'akov** in any way, or prevent **him** from continuing on **his** journey. Although **he** didn't have a personal relationship with **ADONAI, Laban** knew enough about **Him** to do what **He** said. And **God** told **him**, "**Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad**" *in other words, be careful what you say and do (31:24)*. Earlier **God** also **came to Abimelech in a dream one night and** warned **him** that **he was as good as dead** if **he** touched Sarah (**20:3**). That is probably the same message that **Laban** got here. Do not touch **the LORD's anointed** (see the commentary on [the Life of David, to see link click Bj - David Spares Sha'ul's Life](#)).

Early the next morning, **Laban** and **his** relatives overwhelmed the camp of **Ya'akov** and **his** family. As **they** rode into camp, you could cut the tension with a knife. **Laban** was frustrated and angry because **he** wanted to harm **Jacob**, and **Laban's sons** were desperate for **Jacob's** flocks. But **Ya'akov** was confident that **God** would fulfill **His** promises to **him**.

When **Laban** finally met **Jacob** face to face he launched into a hypocritical tirade and **said to him: What have you done? You've deceived me, and you've carried off my daughters like prisoners of war. Why did you run off secretly and hide from me? Why didn't you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of tambourines and harps? You didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters' goodbye. You have done a foolish thing (31:26-28).** Everybody there knew **he** was lying. **Laban** didn't care about **his daughters** before, and **he** certainly didn't care about them now. The real reason **he** came after **Jacob** was to **harm him** and get **his** flocks and herds back.

Laban tells **Ya'akov** that **he** had **the power to harm him**, and doubtless would have, but for the warning from **God** the previous night. **But last night the God of**

your father said to me: **Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.** Unable to harm **him, Laban** self-righteously charges **Jacob** with the theft of **his** household **gods.** **Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father’s house. But why did you steal my gods (31:29-30)?** **Laban** believes that **Ya’akov** will come back some day to claim **his** property by producing these **household gods,** but **Jacob** has no knowledge of **them.**

Before answering **Laban’s** charge of the theft of **the household gods Jacob,** wanted to tell **Laban** and everyone else exactly *why* **he** had left so suddenly and secretly. **Laban** had asked the question and, even though **Jacob** knew that **Laban** knew the real answer already, all the others did not. So **he** confessed: **I was afraid** to tell **you I** was leaving, **because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force (31:31).** If that were the case, **Jacob** would certainly have fought and blood would have been shed. In **his** mind, that was a real possibility. So it was far better for **him** to take **his** family and possessions and slip away quietly.

As far as **the household gods** were concerned, **Jacob** had no idea what **Laban** was talking about. In fact, the very thought made **him** angry. **But if you find anyone who has your gods,** that person **shall not live.** The Code of Hammurabi said that stealing **household gods** was punishable by death. **In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it. Now Ya’akov did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods** and hid **them inside her camel’s saddle. So Laban** started searching; **he went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah’s tent,** there was one last **tent** to search, and **he entered Rachel’s tent (31:32-33).**

Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel’s saddle and was sitting on them. Because of **Jacob’s** vow, **her** life was then in danger. There was no reason to believe that **Laban** would execute **his** own daughter, but **he** was becoming more and more unstable. **Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing (31:34).** The only place left to search was the **camel’s saddle** upon which **Rachel** was **sitting.**

There can be no doubt that **she** was afraid for **herself** and **her husband.** At this point if **she** confessed, there was no telling what **her father** might do. No, **her** best strategy was to do exactly what **she** did. But the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. **Rachel said to her father, “Don’t be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up**

in your presence; I'm having my period." This was the local custom. **She said she** was in pain and discomfort and could not rise. Therefore, in the last analysis, **Laban** was deceived by local custom, just as **he** had deceived **Jacob** by local **custom (29:26)**. **God** allowed **her** plan to succeed because **Jacob** was innocent of all wrongdoing. If found, **Laban** would have accused **Ya'akov** of stealing and lying even though **he** knew **Jacob** was innocent. **So he searched but could not find the household gods (31:35)**. **Jacob** got a lot more confident at that point.

Ya'akov, who had suffered for so many years at the hands of **Laban**, **was angry and** finally blew **his** top. **He** defended **himself** by asking: **What is my crime? What sin have I committed that you hunt me down? Now that you have searched through all my goods, what have you found that belongs to your household? Put it here in front of your relatives and mine, and let them judge between the two of us (31:36-37)**. Of course **Laban** produces nothing because **he** had no evidence. **He** could only stand there in embarrassed silence.

Once having begun **his** impassioned protest, **Jacob** could hardly restrain **himself**. **He** had waited so long to express **his** resentment at **Laban's** treatment, and now **he** had to get it completely off **his** chest.⁴⁹⁵ **He** continued: **I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried**, which frequently happened to careless shepherds, **neither have I eaten rams from your flocks**, which was a common sin among shepherds at that time, but because **Jacob** was an honest man, **he** never did it **(31:38)**.

I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts. The common practice was that if a wild beast killed a shepherd's animal, he could bring the carcass of the animal to the owner to show that he was not at fault, and the owner would bear the loss. But **Jacob** never did that; instead, he **bore the loss himself** from **his** own flocks. **And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night (31:39)**.

This was what **I** had to endure: **The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes (31:40)**. This was no mama's boy. Earlier, when **Jacob** was described as **staying among the tents (25:27)**, this meant that **he** had gone into the family business of being a shepherd, unlike **his** brother Esau. What is being described here are the difficulties of the life of a shepherd.

According to the Code of Hammurabi, any charge of negligence could be challenged

in court. Shepherds gave a receipt of animals they took to the owner, and they were supposed to return the animals with a reasonable increase. They were allowed to use some for food. However, they were not responsible for those animals killed by wild beasts or lightning. But any loss due to carelessness had to be repaid ten times over. This shows that **Ya'akov** didn't even demand **his** rights that **he** could have claimed under the legal system at that time. **He** was an honest man who was beyond **rebuke**.

It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and despite all of this, you changed my wages ten times (31:41). At every turn, **Laban** proved **himself** to be untrustworthy.

Ya'akov appealed to **God** just as **Laban** had done earlier (**31:29**). Speaking to **Laban** he said: **If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, had not been with me, and had the fear of the God of Isaac not been with you, you would surely have sent me away the way I came to you, empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you (31:42).** Therefore, in the eyes of **God**, who was the **Israelite in whom there** was much **guile (John 1:47 KJ)**? In **God's** estimation, it was **Laban!** Although **Jacob** was beyond **rebuke**, **God** had **rebuked Laban the night** before.