

WISDOM FROM THE BEGINNING – PART VI – SECTION IV

THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY HOME

I. The second half of chapter 30 describes Jacob's initial intention to return home and the delay that led to further tension.

A. Once the beloved Rachel has born a son, Jacob wants to return to the land of his father, which was his initial intention.

1. After fourteen years of labor, he has fulfilled his obligations to Laban and received what he wanted, both a beloved wife and a son by her.
2. He also may have been increasingly worried that the new children would grow up, getting used to a foreign land, and would not wish to return with him later.

B. Laban does not wish for Jacob to leave and offers greater wages.

1. Strangely enough, Laban refers to divination as the means by which he learned that Jacob is so valuable. It would seem that mere observation would be enough. He may have been trying to add a spiritual reason for Jacob to stay.
2. There may be here also an implied threat that, if Jacob leaves, Laban will keep the wives and children.
3. Jacob responds by arguing that he should look after his own family's interests as well as he had for Laban's. Jacob could be bargaining for more wages or giving another reason why he really must return home. Laban takes it in the former sense and asks Jacob to set the wages.

C. Jacob proposes wages that seem to be very favorable to Laban, but in fact set up a means by which Jacob can enrich

himself.

1. Jacob proposes that animals of a certain color, namely, dark sheep and spotted or speckled goats, would be his. Jacob would presumably shepherd the animals and take the ones with these rare colors, for in the Middle East almost all sheep are white and goats black or brown.

2. One of the great ironies is that the proposed reason for making this color-based distinction is that it would prevent any dishonesty or disagreement, for it would be obvious who what the owner of each animal. And yet the arrangement becomes the source of much dishonesty. One lesson is that, if people are going to be dishonest, they will find a way.

D. Laban begins the dishonesty by removing all of the black sheep and spotted or speckled goats from his flock and giving them to his sons. Technically, that move might not have violated the agreement because Jacob had not yet begun tending the flock yet. However, there is a clear underhandedness here, in cheating Jacob of both current and future flocks.

E. Jacob, however, has his own tactics, through which the newer sheep and goats would be favorable to him.

1. He shows the goats a certain type of shoot, which was thought to cause them to bear spotted or speckled offspring. It is not clear exactly how he caused the sheep to bear black offspring, but it seemed ironically to involve the very flocks of Laban's sons that were used to cheat Jacob.

2. It is likely that the author knows that God is really the one helping Jacob. Jacob claims later that he was instructed to carry out this plan by God, although it is not clear whether that really happened.

3. Jacob does not try to get all of the flock to be black sheep or spotted or speckled goats. That would give the game

away too quickly. Rather, he tries to get a disproportionate number of the flock, and particularly almost all of the healthiest flock, to be so.

4. It appears from Jacob's speech to his wives in chapter 31 that, when the new goats were speckled, Laban proposed a change whereby Jacob would get the streaked goats. Jacob would agree and the new animals would be of that color.
5. Sheep and sheep live an average of 8-15 years now, with female sheep usually bearing one to three young a year for four to five years. With premature deaths, by the end of six years, most of the animals from the beginning of the pact would have died within six years. And all of the fertile animals would have been born in that time. Thus, the flocks (which were the main measure of wealth) would have now been going heavily toward Jacob.

II. After six years of this arrangement, Jacob realizes that there is danger building and tries to flee with his wives, children and flock.

A. The tension is building as Laban's sons begin figuring out that Jacob is getting more and more wealth, although they perhaps do not know why.

1. It is noteworthy that now Laban's sons, not Laban, are the ones who are grumbling. It has been about eighty years since Abraham's servant spoke to Laban about bringing Rebekah to be Isaac's wife. Thus, assuming that this is the same Laban here, he is presumably over 100 years old. As a result, he may not have been as alert to the situation as he could be.
2. In any case, the sons are concerned for their father, and also likely for their own future inheritance. They may also be worried about having Jacob or his children to compete with them for dominance of the region.

- B. Even with that opposition building, it seems that Jacob was still uncertain, for things were going well. And he was not the sort of person who liked to travel, or the conflict that leaving could bring.
- C. God resolves that matter by appearing to Jacob, telling him to go to the home of his fathers.
- God reminds Jacob of the covenant made with his fathers and promises him His presence. There is perhaps an implicit warning that He will not be with Jacob if he remains where he is.
- D. Heeding God's call, Jacob also wants to make sure that his wives will go with him. After all, they have grown up in the region, and it is not clear that they will want to leave.
1. Noteworthily, he meets them together. It seems that Leah, who has borne six children, has a higher status in his eyes than she had before.
 2. His first argument is, accurately, that he has worked hard for their father and has done well. However, even here, while he accurately describes Laban's deception, he leaves out his own.
 3. However, he then changes the story a bit to justify his own behavior in getting the greater portion of the flocks. First, he says that Laban proposed the arrangement whereby he would have the spotted and speckled goats (and presumably the black sheep), whereas in fact Jacob proposed it. Second, Jacob says that God told him to use a mechanism whereby the animals would be of the color that belonged to him. It is not at all clear that that is what happened.
 4. Jacob does then accurately say that God is calling him to leave the land of Laban and return home.
- E. It turns out to be relatively easy to persuade Leah and Rachel and they quickly agree to leave with Jacob.

1. The two women respond together, which may indicate that the rivalry has lessened, possibly because they each have children and at least some of Jacob's affection.
2. They are apparently (and understandably) resentful that their father used their wedding as a means of gaining wealth, without any apparent concern for them. It does not appear that any of the other characters has realized this point.
3. They are also contemptuous of Laban for failing to manage his estate well.
4. One gets the impression from their father that their decision is right and justified, but also tainted by a lack of concern for their family. There is an unfortunate lack of harmony in that culture.

III. Jacob's flight turns out very differently than expected as Laban pursues them and a side plot develops over the theft of Laban's idols by Rachel.

A. Despite his cleverness regarding flocks and property, Jacob does not plan the departure well. He tries to evade any conflict with Laban by departing quickly when Laban is away with his flocks.

1. Jacob, perhaps correctly, believes that Laban will try to stop him if he leaves, or at least try to keep the flocks and the women and children.

2. However, Jacob completely overestimates the difficulty that Laban will have in finding him, and so sets off with an inadequate lead time. His continual efforts at evading conflict finally fail. But that failure will lead to a good result, as he apparently begins to speak with people more directly, first Laban and then Esau.

B. The text subtly indicates a colossal problem developing by noting, almost in passing, that Rachel stole Laban's household gods.

1. It appears likely that she had an attachment to those gods; she has not left her pagan ways behind.

- She also may have been trying to prevent Laban from using them for divination to find out where the group had fled.

2. Some commentators have proposed that she wanted to get rid of the idolatry in her family by taking the gods.

However, she does not show much other concern for her family. And, if getting rid of the idols was the main concern, it would seem that she would have cast them aside at some point.

3. The entire event indicates two problems. First, idols are now being smuggled into the family. Idolatry would ever be a problem for the Chosen People. Second, the fact that Jacob does not realize or even imagine that Rachel has stolen the idols indicates that, even after 20 years, he does not know her that well. It seems that his love has been rather superficial.

4. Leah, the second-tier wife, comes off again as a better match than the loved one.

C. After three days, Laban begins pursuing Jacob, and catches him three days later, but things still turn out well.

1. Understandably, Laban is angry at the trickery of Jacob, and his wives, leaving without notice.

2. Laban, without the burden of great flocks or a large family, can travel much faster. He also knows the land and the people well enough that he can find out where Jacob is going.

3. However, God intervenes to warn Laban against harm. The actual words are that Laban "should not speak to Jacob of good or evil." That apparently means that Laban should not try to get Jacob to return either by threats or incentives.

4. It is not clear what Laban intended to do, or even if Laban himself had a settled plan. But here, despite all of Jacob's follies, God is still looking out for him.

- It is also not clear what Laban thought when the true God spoke to him, for Laban was plainly a pagan, with many gods.

D. Laban then scolds Jacob for leaving so abruptly and for the theft of the idols, combining righteous anger and perhaps some exaggeration.

1. Laban rightfully condemns the deceit and the lack of an opportunity for a farewell. He also says (perhaps with some disingenuity) that he would have generously let his daughters go.
2. He does say that the God of Isaac spoke to him and told him to let Jacob go, but also acts as though the decision is still his.
3. He then brings up the theft of the idols, a matter about which Jacob is ignorant.

E. Seizing on the last point, and believing (entirely erroneously) that the accusation of theft is false, Jacob takes the offensive.

1. Jacob says (probably accurately) that he was afraid of Laban's response if he told Laban of his departure. He may be hinting at Laban's insincerity.
2. It does seem that he is sincere although mistaken in his denunciation of the theft allegation, for he offers that anyone found with the idols will be executed. And, unlike his previous machinations, it does not seem that he is planning this response; otherwise, he may have realized the possibility that the allegation is true.
3. Jacob's offer that anyone who stole the idols should die is poignant, not only because it creates tension as one wonders what will happen next, but also because Rachel will soon die, in giving birth to Benjamin a little while later. See Gen. 35:16-19.

- F. It is now Rachel's turn to use deceit as she hides the idols she has stolen in a pillow that she then sits on. Laban is in turn deceived and puzzled as he does not find the idols.
- G. Jacob then finally gives a speech in which he lists his grievances and, here at last, recognizes his dependence of the providence of God, who has guided his family.
- The speech is still a little insincere because it does not refer to the fact that Jacob used deceit as well as Laban. But Jacob is at last dealing with Laban directly and emphasizing his relationship with God, an important advancement for one who is becoming a patriarch.