

## Exegetical Notes – Genesis 31:1-21

### *“Jacob’s Return to Isaac”*

Prepared by Charles H. Jensen for Cornerstone Fellowship

101 Kyllies Road, Coatesville, PA 19320

610-384-1375

[charleshjensen@aol.com](mailto:charleshjensen@aol.com)

(Genesis answers three basic theological questions. The first question is, “Whose world is it anyway?” The text answers the question by affirming that it is God’s world by right of creation. It is God’s world because God made it. The second question Genesis asks is “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way?” The answer is by trusting God and obeying Him. Family becomes the concern, and Genesis begins to answer the third question, “How do we get along in God’s world God’s way particularly with the members of our own family?” In Genesis 25, we visited the family of Abraham, and we have seen how Abraham’s family was fractured because Abraham did not trust God completely and did not follow the plan of God for marriage. We saw how the family of Isaac, Abraham’s heir, was divided by parental favoritism. So far, we have not seen a family that remained healthy and intact. This text continues by showing what happened in Jacob’s family.)

## Genesis 31:1-21

### Verses 1-3

***<sup>1</sup> Jacob heard that Laban’s sons were saying, “Jacob has taken everything our father owned and has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father.” <sup>2</sup> And Jacob noticed that Laban’s attitude toward him was not what it had been.***

***<sup>3</sup> Then the Lord said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.”***

- Jacob, Isaac’s heir, has become a wealthy man while working for his Uncle Laban. But the situation between Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, has deteriorated. Neither trusts the other. In fact, each works secretly to the detriment of the other (see Genesis 30). Laban and his sons believe that Jacob has stolen his wealth from their father, and Laban resents Jacob.
- God told Jacob that he should return to his father, Isaac. Notice that the text does not use the name YHWH when it mentions God. It simply calls God, “Lord,” in Hebrew “Adonai.” While Jacob knows YHWH, his relationship with

YHWH is not personal but somewhat distant. None-the-less, God promises to be with Jacob if Jacob obeys Him and returns home. How do we get along in God's world God's way? We trust and obey! This has been the problem all along. God's people have NOT trusted God by obeying Him.

#### Verses 4-13

**<sup>4</sup> So Jacob sent word to Rachel and Leah to come out to the fields where his flocks were. <sup>5</sup> He said to them, "I see that your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, but the God of my father has been with me. <sup>6</sup> You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength, <sup>7</sup> yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me. <sup>8</sup> If he said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked young. <sup>9</sup> So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me.**

**<sup>10</sup> "In breeding season I once had a dream in which I looked up and saw that the male goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled or spotted. <sup>11</sup> The angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob.' I answered, 'Here I am.' <sup>12</sup> And he said, 'Look up and see that all the male goats mating with the flock are streaked, speckled or spotted, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. <sup>13</sup> I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me. Now leave this land at once and go back to your native land.'"**

- Jacob summoned his wives, Leah and Rachel, to come to him at the place where he was tending his flocks. He called them to come to him in a place where they could meet with him without Laban or his sons knowing or anyone from Laban's household overhearing their conversation. He behaves secretly.
- He explained to his wives the situation between himself and their father. He told them of a second dream he had about God blessing him in which he references the first dream he had at Bethel (see Genesis 28:10-32). And he told his wives that God was now telling him to leave Laban's household and return to his homeland.

#### Verses 14-16

**<sup>14</sup> Then Rachel and Leah replied, "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? <sup>15</sup> Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. <sup>16</sup> Surely all the wealth that God**

***took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you.”***

- Jacob’s wives agree with him concerning Laban’s treatment of him and them. They agree to do whatever God has told them to do. With Jacob, they will trust God and obey God.

#### **Verses 17-18**

***<sup>17</sup> Then Jacob put his children and his wives on camels, <sup>18</sup> and he drove all his livestock ahead of him, along with all the goods he had accumulated in Paddan Aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.***

- Without telling Laban anything, Jacob packed up his belongings and departed for Canaan.

#### **Verses 19-21**

***<sup>19</sup> When Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole her father’s household gods. <sup>20</sup> Moreover, Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him he was running away. <sup>21</sup> So he fled with all he had, crossed the Euphrates River, and headed for the hill country of Gilead.***

- Jacob apparently left Laban’s household while Laban was away shearing his sheep. There was no discussion between them about Jacob’s plan to go home. In the words of the text, Jacob was running away or fleeing from Laban as he had fled Esau when he left Canaan and Isaac’s household (see Genesis 28:1-9).
- Rachel stole her “father’s household gods.” Laban, like most men of the time, had a collection of personal gods, idols, to whom he prayed to protect him and his family and his business. He would have kept them in his “god box,” a small cupboard or closet. He would only have opened this box when he was praying to these gods. Rachel took the idols in Laban’s “god box.” No one would notice that the idols were gone until Laban next opened the box to pray. It is important to notice that the idols were not given to her. She stole them.
- Jacob “fled” from Laban as a thief would leave and headed for Canaan. This behavior is reminiscent of his behavior in Genesis 28:1-9. It implies that he is guilty of some bad behavior.

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