

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 31:22-55

“They Made a Covenant”

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(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 31:22-55

Verses 22-24

²² On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ²³ Taking his relatives with him, he pursued Jacob for seven days and caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴ Then God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream at night and said to him, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.”

- Jacob had run away from his father Isaac’s household to escape the wrath of his brother Esau. He had lived for 20 years in the household of his Uncle Laban, his mother’s brother. He had married Laban’s daughters, Leah and Rachel, and had taken their maids as his concubines. He had had children by all four women. He had prospered and grown wealthy, but his uncle’s sons had become suspicious of him. So, secretly, Jacob departed from Laban’s household with his family and all of his belongings intending to return to Isaac’s household.

- On the third day after Jacob left Laban, Laban learned that Jacob was gone. Laban pursued Jacob for 7 days and caught up with him at Gilead. Laban pursued Jacob for more than 300 miles.
- But before Laban reached Jacob, God warned him not to accuse Jacob of doing anything either good or bad. God commanded Laban not to enter into any dispute with Jacob about any matter. This command did not forbid conversation between them but did command Laban not to dispute with Jacob over any matter.

Verses 25-30

²⁵ Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country of Gilead when Laban overtook him, and Laban and his relatives camped there too. ²⁶ Then Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done? You’ve deceived me, and you’ve carried off my daughters like captives in war. ²⁷ Why did you run off secretly and deceive me? Why didn’t you tell me, so I could send you away with joy and singing to the music of timbrels and harps? ²⁸ You didn’t even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing. ²⁹ I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’ ³⁰ Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father’s household. But why did you steal my gods?”

- When Laban reached Jacob’s encampment, he also made camp there. He then proceeded to break the command that God had given him. He brought accusations of wrongdoing against Jacob. And then he told Jacob what God had commanded him. Laban had not attacked Jacob’s encampment to seek revenge for the grievances he accused Jacob of doing against him, even though he could have done so. Apparently, Laban believed that he had fulfilled God’s command by not seeking revenge for the wrong Jacob had done to him.
- Laban then proceeded to accuse Jacob of stealing his household gods (see Genesis 31:1-21 and the notes on that passage). Jacob was unaware that Rachel, his wife and Laban’s daughter, had, in fact, stolen Laban’s idols.

Verses 31-32

³¹ Jacob answered Laban, “I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. ³² But if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself

whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it.” Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.

- Jacob confessed that he fled from Laban secretly because he was afraid of Laban.
- But he denied that he or anyone with him had taken anything that belonged to Laban. He invited Laban to search through his encampment in the presence of witnesses to prove that nothing belonging to Laban was there.
- Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen her father’s idols.

Verses 33-35

³³ So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah’s tent, he entered Rachel’s tent. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel’s saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing.

³⁵ Rachel said to her father, “Don’t be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I’m having my period.” So he searched but could not find the household gods.

- So Laban searched Jacob’s camp. He went through everyone’s tent, Rachel’s last of all.
- Rachel, who had stolen the idols, had put them under her saddle and was sitting on the saddle as her father searched her tent. As Laban was preparing to leave the tent, she meekly apologized for not standing to respect him, claiming that she could not do so because she was having her period.

Verse 36-42

³⁶ Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. “What is my crime?” he asked Laban. “How have I wronged you that you hunt me down? ³⁷ 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.

³⁸ “I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. ³⁹ I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. ⁴⁰ This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my

eyes. ⁴¹ *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 you changed my wages ten times. ⁴² If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you.*

- Jacob then spoke to Laban in anger. He accused Laban of treating him unfairly and dishonestly over and over again for 20 years (see Genesis 29-30 and the notes on those passages). Jacob said that Laban's dream was God's way of rebuking him for the way Laban had treated him.

Verses 43-44

⁴³ *Laban answered Jacob, "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine. Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne? ⁴⁴ Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us."*

- Laban then accused Jacob of stealing everything he had from him. But he confessed that he had been commanded by God not to do anything about what Jacob had done. Both men accused the other of cheating on him and stealing from him.
- Thinking he was being obedient to the command of God not to seek revenge against Jacob, Laban suggested that they make a "covenant," an agreement, between them to depart from one another in peace.
- Laban believed he was acting in accord with God's command and was being the bigger man in the situation.

Verses 45-55

⁴⁵ *So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶ He said to his relatives, "Gather some stones." So they took stones and piled them in a heap, and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷ Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, and Jacob called it Galeed.*

⁴⁸ *Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." That is why it was called Galeed. ⁴⁹ It was also called Mizpah, because he said, "May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. ⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my*

daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me.”

⁵¹ Laban also said to Jacob, “Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. ⁵² This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. ⁵³ May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.”

So Jacob took an oath in the name of the Fear of his father Isaac. ⁵⁴ He offered a sacrifice there in the hill country and invited his relatives to a meal. After they had eaten, they spent the night there.

⁵⁵ Early the next morning Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then he left and returned home.

- Jacob accepted Laban’s offer. Both sides agreed to a peace treaty between them. Jacob set up a monument to confirm the agreement between them. The two men and their households ate together and each named the monument. It would serve as a physical reminder of the agreement in the future. They pledged to part from each other in peace and to leave each other alone. Both called upon God to be the judge between them. If either of them broke the agreement, that one would be judged by God.
- The two men and their households lived side by side in peace with each other for three days. On the third day, Laban said goodbye to his daughters and went home.

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