



WORK, AT WHAT PRICE?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 30:25-31:16

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Do you sometimes wonder whether God is involved in your work? Most Christians have a rather narrow view of work. They regard their labors as merely a means to a paycheck that will help them create or become involved in “real” ministry, when they are not at work. Few believers view their workplace as the stage where God is supremely involved, both in shaping their character and displaying his image in creation. Our text from the life of Jacob tells a different story. Its length and sophistication speak volumes about the value that God places on our work. Paul Stevens comments: “Jacob is the first worker in the Bible—the first to have his work vividly described in its complexities and satisfactions. But more importantly, this story reveals God’s interest in work. Jacob’s work (and ours) is a way to God, blessed by God, and becomes a ministry to God and our neighbor.”¹

As Jacob’s children, on this Fathers Day it might be appropriate to go to work with the patriarch to see what he really did during his fourteen years of work for Laban. The text begins immediately after Rachel’s long-awaited birth of Joseph, her first son.

I. Jacob At Work, Negotiating (Gen 30:25-36)

A. Jacob’s request to leave (30:25-26)

Now it came about when Rachel had borne Joseph, that Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me depart; for you yourself know my service which I have rendered [lit. “served”] you.” (Gen 30:25-26, NASB)

With Rachel finally giving birth, Jacob now feels free to begin packing for the Promised Land. Had Rachel remained barren, she probably would have been pressured to remain at home under her father’s controlling hand. Typically, Jacob has to take the initiative to ask that Laban fulfill the agreements he had made with him. Jacob’s tone reveals that these last years of service have left their mark on him. Beneath his resentment is a bold confidence (“you yourself know”) concerning the value of what he has accomplished for his father-in-law. He has no shame in placing the integrity of his work open for inspection.

B. Laban delays and asks Jacob to name “wages” (30:27-28)

But Laban said to him, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, stay with me; I have divined that the LORD has blessed me on your account.” He continued, “Name me your wages, and I will give it.” (Gen 30:27-28)

Bruce Waltke explains: “In the preceding scenes, God has been building Jacob’s house, in this scene, his property. Prudently, one should build up property before his family (Prov 27:23-27), but Laban prevents his flesh and blood from acting prudently. During the first seven years of their marriage contract, Laban should have allowed Jacob to prepare for his household; instead, he left him empty-handed. Now Jacob builds up his property on his own.”² In Laban’s reluctant offer one can hear the echo of an unjust man. Earlier he had asked Jacob to name his wages and, following an agreement, had doubled Jacob’s service. So now he must add that “this time” he will follow through (“I will give it”).

C. Jacob reminds Laban of how God has blessed him (30:29-30)

But he said to him, “You yourself know how I have served you and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had lit-

tle before I came and it has increased to a multitude, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now, when shall I provide for my own household also?” So he said, “What shall I give you?” (Gen 30:29-30)

Instead of responding to his offer, Jacob backs Laban into a corner, forcing him to admit that God has blessed him exceedingly while he has served him.³ Jacob’s investments have paid off handsomely. But for all of Laban’s profit, the question still remains, what will become of Jacob’s family? His question is designed to shame his miserly father-in-law. Laws enacted later in Israel demanded that when a slave was set free after six years, he was not to be sent away empty-handed, but was to be given a liberal gift from the flock (Deut 15:12-15). How shameful then, to send a family member away empty handed! For once Laban is speechless; all he can do is repeat his offer.

D. Jacob’s investment scheme (30:31-33)

And Jacob said, “You shall not give me anything. If you will do this one thing for me, I will again pasture and keep your flock: let me pass through your entire flock today, removing from there every speckled and spotted sheep and every black one among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my righteousness will answer for me later, when you come concerning my wages. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, will be considered stolen.” (Gen 30:31-33)

Shrewdly, Jacob doesn’t ask to be compensated. He knows that any gift from Laban will come with strings attached. Instead, he proposes to acquire the least favorable animals from among the flock. Wenham explains: “In a flock of sheep and goats, the sheep are mostly all white, the goats all black or dark brown. Multicolored sheep and goats are much rarer. Jacob suggests that all the multicolored animals be his wage and that the pure white sheep and the dark goats be Laban’s.”⁴ Waltke further suggests: “Normally the hire of a shepherd is 20 percent of the flock, and rarely, if ever, would the speckled population be such a large percentage.”⁵ To the greedy Laban it seems as though Jacob wants practically nothing. Once the flock is removed, any mishandling of it will be easily detected by the color of the lambs and goats. The whole process appears foolproof. How could Laban refuse such an offer?

E. Laban agrees (30:34-36)

Laban said, “Good, let it be according to your word.” So he removed on that day the striped and spotted male goats and all the speckled and spotted female goats, every one with white in it, and all the black ones among the sheep, and gave them into the care of his sons. And he put a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob fed the rest of Laban’s flocks. (Gen 30:34-36)

Fokkelman captures Laban’s character: “Laban, always on guard, safety-first his motto, is not deceived. Speaking in monosyllables, he is the big man, never committing himself... ‘Oh well, let it be just as you have said.’”⁶ But in case Jacob has any tricks up his sleeve, Laban steals the initiative away from him and removes Jacob’s “inferior” animals himself. To ensure that Jacob cannot acquire any of these multicolored animals, he separates

them from Jacob by three days distance, placing them under the protective care of his own sons. Little does Laban know that his mistrust will work to Jacob's advantage. Now that Laban is well out of sight, his son-in-law can launch his experiments in selective breeding and genetic engineering, without fear of detection.

What follows is as fascinating as it is humorous.

II. Jacob's Creative Breeding Techniques (Gen 30:37-43)

A. Jacob's "white" magic (30:37-38)

Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar [*libneh*] and almond and plane trees, and peeled white [*lebonot*] stripes in them, exposing the white [*laban*] which was in the rods. He set the rods which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the gutters, even in the watering troughs, where the flocks came to drink; and they mated when they came to drink. (Gen 30:37-38)

Jacob strips the bark off three different types of trees, exposing the "white" (*laban*) stripes underneath, and places the rods in the gutters of the watering stations while the animals are in heat. He is betting that these "watery" visions of white stripes will affect the outcome of the breeding process. That the coloring of the lambs and kids should be determined by what their parents see during copulation seems absurd to modern ears. "Sarna says that these three trees, which have toxic substances used medicinally in the ancient world, may have 'had the effect of hastening the onset of the estrus cycle and so heightened [the animal's] readiness to copulate.'"⁷

Though the "scientific" process seems strange, Jacob's motive is clear. The narrator leaves no uncertainty as to his method. Three times in verse 37 he uses Laban's name, which means "white," as a play on words ("poplar" = *libneh*). The term "exposing" the white comes from the verbal root (*chasaph*), which is often used by the prophets to emphasize the shame involved after God's judgment "exposes" sin. So, as Fokkelman suggests, Jacob is using "white magic"⁸ on Laban ("Mr. White") just as he used the "red" stew to manipulate his "red" brother.

Will he be successful in his manipulations?

B. Implementation of the plan (30:39-42)

So the flocks mated by the rods, and the flocks brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and made the flocks face toward the striped and all the black in the flock of Laban; and he put his own herds apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock. Moreover, whenever the stronger of the flock were mating, Jacob would place the rods in the sight of the flock in the gutters, so that they might mate by the rods; but when the flock was feeble, he did not put them in; so the feebler were Laban's and the stronger Jacob's. (Gen 30:39-42)

Jacob's plan is surprisingly successful, so much so that he seeks to achieve the same results by having the sheep face the flocks of speckled goats during mating. If his first principle seems like mere superstition, the second, governing the breeding process, is better documented: "namely, that strong animals are liable to produce sturdy offspring and vice versa. Sarna suggests that the production of the multicolored sheep and goats may also be scientifically explicable. The vigorous animals were hybrids, whose recessive coloring genes emerged when they bred together."⁹ Fokkelman concludes: "With his great experience and clever breeding-methods, with his 'white magic,' Jacob sees to it that with the strong animals all the young that are born have 'white on them' (*laban bo*, 30:29)."¹⁰

Imagine Jacob's delight at giving Laban a taste of his own medicine! Laban gave Jacob "two wives: one beautiful and one with 'weak eyes.' He did not want the weak-eyed one."¹¹ So now Jacob enriches himself with only the strong and beautiful flock, while he sends all the weaker ones home to his father-in-law.

This is not the first time Jacob has participated in a plan of deception using goats (27:16). By now he is becoming an expert in his field.

C. Jacob cashes in on his investments (30:43)

So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks and female and male servants and camels and donkeys. (Gen 30:43)

The narrator paints Jacob's success in superlative terms, reflecting God's promise at Bethel to be with him. (The verb *paratz*, translated "prosperous," carries the idea of "breaking out with force," and was used to describe Jacob's seed, in 28:14.) So successful is Jacob it appears he is able to cash in a portion of his "stock options" and purchase a small convoy to make his trip home! He arrived in Haran a naked fugitive; he will depart like royalty. The description is reminiscent of the wealth that Abraham's servant brought when he came to Haran (24:10).

If we are wondering how could God bless Jacob's "magic" manipulations, and where is God to be found in this fierce contest between manipulators, the narrator keep us in suspense until the final scene. Not until Jacob speaks with Rachel and Leah about the necessity to leave will he reveal that there was much more going on under the surface. Now we discover how God was involved in Jacob's work.

III. Caution, God At Work! (Gen 31:1-16)

A. Time to leave (31:1-3)

Now Jacob heard the words of Laban's sons, saying, "Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth." Jacob saw the attitude of Laban, and behold, it was not friendly toward him as formerly. Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you." (Gen 31:1-3)

The necessity for a quick departure is impressed on Jacob from what he hears from Laban's sons, what he sees from Laban's face, and finally, what he hears from God. Laban's sons are filled with jealousy as they observe Jacob prosper at what they feel is their father's expense. In essence, they accuse Jacob of stealing their inheritance. This unwelcome atmosphere is intensified by just one look on Laban's face. If any residue of doubt remains with Jacob that it is finally time to return to the land of promise, God himself gives a direct word that the moment is at hand. With no time to lose, Jacob summons Rachel and Leah to a secluded location in the field, where their conversation cannot be overheard.

B. More of Laban's treachery (31:4-13)

So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah to his flock in the field, and said to them, "I see your father's attitude, that it is not friendly toward me as formerly, but the God of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength. Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times; however, God did not allow him to hurt me. If he spoke thus, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped. Thus God has taken away your father's livestock and given them to me." (Gen 31:4-9)

As Jacob presses his wives with the case for his integrity toward Laban, we learn that a lot more conflict was present during Jacob's breeding of the flock than was obvious at first reading. As Jacob proved successful in producing multicolored animals, and Laban watched in horror as the young of the strong animals kept going over to Jacob's property, the father-in-law changed the terms of the contract. If the flock came forth speckled, Laban allowed Jacob to keep only the striped. If the flock produced striped, Laban would follow suit by changing his "wages" back to the speckled. So no matter how successful Jacob's engineering

feats, his CEO always had another card in hand to determine his wages—after the fact. This scenario is akin to a sales manager cutting a salesman’s territory in two and then changing the man’s sales district after each quarter, based on the period that had produced the least earnings. Just as in the case of Jacob’s marriages and children, God’s promise of his presence to bless does not imply an absence of conflict. But though Laban imagined that he could always play the final card, God holds the trump card.

C. A revelatory dream (31:10-13)

“And it came about at the time when the flock were mating that I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream, and behold, the male goats which were mating were striped, speckled, and mottled. Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. ‘I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.’” (Gen 31:10-13)

Now we learn that after Laban decided to change the original contract, God gave Jacob¹² a dream to show him how he had intervened after his father-in-law began exploiting the situation. No matter how many times Laban attempted to change Jacob’s wages, God would have the flock produce what Laban decreed those wages would be. So now we discover that Jacob’s success had far more to do with the sovereign God blessing him than his own manipulative and magical mating techniques.

The story reads almost like a divine joke on all parties. To Laban, the one who always changes his word, the ethical God gives what he deserves. Each time Laban’s word changes, so does “fate.” How frustrating this must have been to someone who had to be in control. For Jacob the manipulator, his best efforts, which appeared fruitful, were outdone by a Laban whom he could not control. Jacob’s success was due to the grace of God alone. Two manipulative men met their match in one another as each defeated the other at his own game. It is only afterwards that God plays the trump card of justice and grace.

Jacob’s reflection is a big moment of faith for him as he gives glory to God for what God has done. It is also a display of taking spiritual leadership in his home, where in the last scene he had been totally passive.

D. Rachel and Leah consent to leave with Jacob (31:14-16)

Rachel and Leah said to him, “Do we still have any portion or inheritance in our father’s house? Are we not reckoned by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and has also entirely consumed our purchase price. Surely all the wealth which God has taken away from our father belongs to us and our children; now then, do whatever God has said to you.” (Gen 31:14-16)

Just as Rebekah was given the option to leave home for the land of faith, so the same question is posed to Jacob’s wives. He cannot take them without their consent. Their answer, however, indicates their motive is more one of escaping an oppressive father than looking forward by faith to the new land of promise. Laban is such a bad father, his daughters feel totally estranged from him. They are nameless foreigners to him. Worse still, even foreigners receive hospitality, but these daughters were sold for profit, and now, twenty years later, there is nothing left of their dowry. Laban has utterly consumed fourteen years of salary that Jacob has worked for, spending all of it on himself. Waltke explains: “Legally, the consummating sum given in marriage was to be transferred at least in part to the daughters.”¹³ These women are all too happy to leave. They regard Jacob’s success as the work of God, justly restoring what was rightfully theirs.

This completes Jacob’s twenty-year sojourn in Haran. Why does God give us such a long and detailed look at Jacob’s work? I believe that work is the main stage where, as sons of Abraham, we are to be a blessing to everyone around us, both in the work of creation and redemption. Paul Stevens identifies three different phases of Jacob’s career in Haran: “slave work,” “love work,” and “faith work.”¹⁴ These provide a helpful framework for how we ought to view our life’s work.

IV. Working With God For God

A. “Slave” Work—God working in you

Upon arriving in Haran, Jacob had no income or assets to speak of. All he could offer was his service in return for the hospitality shown him by Laban. Over the first month Jacob performed the tasks of a household servant, doing anything Laban put before him. Our first work experiences usually come under this category of “slave” work. Opportunity is limited for the young. The pay is inadequate, the work tedious and monotonous. Jacob’s second term of service to pay off his debt to Laban falls under this category. If you are in debt, you must simply give yourself to hard work, even to the point of exhaustion, because you are in fact a “slave” and belong to someone else. You are not free until the debt is paid.

Where is God to be found in “slave” work? He is working in you! Seven years and one month of “slave” work did remarkable things for Jacob. In that period a tent-dwelling mother’s boy became a man of the field, like his brother Esau. Jacob learned how to tend and care for flocks and herds—and all about their mating habits. As he is forced to enter a new world, he is learning to imitate the kind of work that God does.

Working for an oppressive employer also served Jacob well. In these later years, working for Laban provided him with many valuable skills, the greatest of which was learning how to negotiate a contract in an unfriendly world. Working in an oppressive atmosphere removes the youthful naiveté that often leads to being taken advantage of. These years gave Jacob confidence to initiate business negotiations. They taught him how and when to play the cards in his hand, and how to exact guarantees from a self-serving client. “Slave” work taught Jacob how to battle. This is extremely important. Knowing how to negotiate our way in an evil world prepares us to battle against our spiritual enemy. The devil, much like Laban, seeks every opportunity to take advantage of us. We should not look down at “slave” labor as something to merely endure. These can be some of the most formative times in our lives to shape our character and remove our passivity.

B. “Faith” Work—working for a future

Paul Stevens calls the second phase of work, “faith” work. This is when we labor to provide a future for our families. Usually we come to this stage with a little more experience and can command more freedom in our choice of occupation. At this point in Jacob’s career he uses everything he has learned in his “slave” work and emerges as an entrepreneur venturing out on his first start-up company. He demonstrates amazing initiative, and employs seasoned experience and creativity, when formulating a plan that requires very little capital to get started. With six years of hard work and careful management, he has built very little capital into a significant enterprise. And at the end he is able to cash in some of his stock for other investments to provide for his family’s relocation.

Most of us spend a large part of our lives in this second stage. It is, perhaps, the part of the journey in which we learn most about God at work through our work. But surprisingly, the narrator doesn’t let us in on the secret workings of God until the end of the story. On first reading the account we are drawn into Jacob’s magnificent manipulations, as he ties proven breeding techniques with the “white man’s” superstition. Reading the stockholders’ year-end statement, the profit margins look

unprecedented. If Jacob were here today and told us how God had blessed him, we might be tempted to give him more credit than God.

But the narrator doesn't leave it there. By the end of the story we find that Jacob cannot outwit his competitor Laban. All his schemes went for naught. Laban held all the critical cards. But each time he goes back on his word, "fate" changes as well, so much so that he must have gnashed his teeth. Finally, it takes a supernatural dream and a visit from the angel of the Lord to reveal to Jacob that God had been at work in his work. His productivity was the gift of God, merely because he was an elect son. His final victory over Laban was God's justice meted out to Laban. It had nothing to do with Jacob's righteousness (see also Deut 9:4-6).

Perhaps there is something we can learn in the "way" the narrator tells the story. Is he saying that work is a complex world, where God gives us complete freedom to demonstrate our ethics? Jacob told Laban that his "righteousness" would answer for him. But, as Waltke explains, "Righteousness means to serve the community under God, and not self, and wickedness means to serve self at the expense of others."¹⁵ Though Jacob had for the most part maintained integrity in his relationship with Laban, his scheming to prosper his flocks, and diminish Laban's flocks in the process, was wrong. Surprisingly, God allows Jacob the freedom to carry out his scheme, but then to be overcome and defeated by his adversary, and finally to be delivered by God. Only at the end of the story, after much reflection and a revelatory dream, does Jacob begin to understand the unique mystery of the sovereign God at work in his work. In the end, both competitors learn a hard lesson in ethics. And we learn that if we compromise ethics in our "faith" work, God will judge us. Ethics, not profits, are to be the driving force in "faith" work. And it is ethics, not profits, that will ultimately determine our destiny.

The text forces us to ask ourselves hard questions about our work. When we are successful, how much of our wealth is due to the blessing of God, and how much is the result of unethical manipulations? Is our wealth a result of hard work and producing for others, or did we profit at the expense of others?¹⁶

C. "Love" Work

The final stage of work for most of us, though it occurs early in Jacob's career, is "love" work. This was when Jacob worked for seven years for the hand of the one he loved, and love transformed his work into a ministry. One verse says it all: "they [seven years] seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her" (Gen 29:20). Love takes the toil and frustration out of work. At times, as was the case with Jacob, it makes time fly as if it had wings. This is the work that is done when children care for their aging parents, when mothers nurture their children, or when we

use our spiritual gifts in the church or the world. Love is the motive and reward. Wages cannot measure the magnificent privilege of being a channel for God's grace.

Perhaps "love" work can be your model for retirement. Marty Mathiesen, who retired recently, has been a teacher and educator in the Cupertino schools for 38 years. Now he is going to take all that experience to Romania, to create a quality education for children of missionaries in Bucharest. At a going-away reception last week, Marty was asked what visions he had for the task ahead. He responded enthusiastically, listing more than half a dozen passionate ideas that he wanted to implement, all of which have come out of years of experience, wisdom and character. All we could think of was how God had prepared everything in Marty's life for this new phase of "love" work. Will you too work for love?

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve (Col 3:23-24).

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1. Paul Stevens, *Jacob* (IVP, forthcoming).
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 416-417.
3. Jacob's "blessing" to Laban is in line with the Abrahamic promise "to be a blessing" to all the nations (12:2).
4. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 255.
5. Waltke, *Genesis*, 419.
6. Jan Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 144.
7. Quoted by Waltke, *Genesis*, 420.
8. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 149.
9. Wenham, *Genesis*, 256.
10. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 158.
11. Waltke, *Genesis*, 420.
12. Many commentators regard the dream as Jacob's inspiration for his "mating techniques." It seems to me the dream occurred after Laban's exploitation of the situation, long after Jacob had employed these techniques.
13. Waltke, *Genesis*, 426.
14. Stevens, *Jacob*.
15. Waltke, *Genesis*, 417.
16. Abraham gives the best example of ethical "faith" work in negotiating the purchase price of the cave of Machpelah (23:16), paying full price for the field. The Hittites could not look at that burial plot and accuse Abraham of taking advantage of them.