

# Faith Pulpit

## Jacob's Labor Contracts

After fleeing from Esau, Jacob arrived in Haran. Immediately he met Rachel. The meeting was love at first sight. Rachel was “beautiful and well favored” (29:17). Jacob evidently was strong and muscular, for while the shepherds of three flocks (29:2) could not roll the rock from the well’s opening, Jacob, upon seeing Rachel, “went near, and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth” (29:10).

Jacob spent a month in Laban’s home. No doubt, during this month, he spent much time with Rachel and fell more in love with her. At the end of the month, Laban made Jacob an offer. He said, “Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall thy wages be?”

Jacob, quite carried away with Rachel, said, “I will serve thee seven years for Rachel, thy younger daughter” (29:18). Since Jacob was setting the terms, he could have said three years, which would have been worth more than the customary dowry. In fact, due to his potential wealth, one year could well have been adequate.

Laban, who was even more deceptive and cunning than Jacob, accepted Jacob’s generous offer knowing that one day he would have to part with his daughters anyway, and could not hope to find a more profitable deal than this one (cf. 29:19).

As the seven years came to an end, Laban gave Leah to Jacob instead. He then gave Jacob a new contract: Seven more years for Rachel (29:27). This certainly was unjustified. Crafty Laban had succeeded in bartering both of his daughters for the service of a man whose faithful work was making him rich.

Jacob proved to be a man of his word and worked another seven years. He was now ready to go back to Canaan. Once more Laban was faced with the possibility of losing Jacob. He knew that God was blessing him because of Jacob (30:27). Jacob did not rush into a new contract this time as he had

fourteen years earlier. He was much better acquainted with his uncle now. He set forth his bargaining position before making a proposal. First, he spoke of his faithful service. Second, he mentioned the supernatural blessing Laban had enjoyed since Jacob arrived. Third, Jacob mentioned his own need: “Now when shall I provide for mine own house also?” (30:30).

Laban realized that this new contract was going to cost him more, but he still was interested in Jacob since he was aware of Jacob’s worth to him. Laban asked, “shall I give thee?” Jacob gave his father-in-law a very generous offer. Jacob would receive any lambs born in the future that were speckled, spotted, or black, and any kids that were spotted or speckled. All the others would go to Laban. To better understand this, we must remember that in the Near East such colors were rare. Sheep are usually white and goats are usually black or dark brown. The exceptions to this rule are not numerous.

Jacob even offered to go through the flocks that very day and remove any speckled, spotted, or black sheep and any spotted and speckled goats. With these removed, the chances of these rare colored lambs and kids would be further diminished. Jacob, knowing Laban’s suspicious nature, would have a means of defending what was rightly his and could not be falsely accused of stealing Laban’s flocks. This was actually even more of a concession to Laban, for if in the second generation Jacob’s black sheep should bear white lambs, these apparently would go back to Laban.

If Jacob had set up the terms of the contract as an act of faith in God (who at Bethel had promised to bless him), he soon began to try to manipulate the situation to his benefit. Jacob had a three-point program. First, he took twigs which he partially peeled so that there might be a contrast between the dark bark and the white underwood and set these at the watering troughs. He did this so that the flocks coming to drink might see them, and, breeding before the troughs, might have the spotted pattern stamped upon the unborn.

Second, Jacob put the striped and spotted sheep, that were now born, at the end of his flock, which was ahead of Laban’s flock so that Laban’s herd received another impression of stripes and spots.

Third, Jacob put the sticks by the watering troughs only when the ewes were stronger and were producing stronger lambs. Thus Jacob’s flocks were increased by stronger lambs and kids, while Laban’s were increased with weaker ones.

It is here that the serious Bible student faces some perplexing problems. First, Jacob says that Laban changed his wages ten times (31:7). The text only gives three. However, in the last six-year period Laban evidently made changes in the sheep-goat contract which are not mentioned in the Bible (but implied in 31:8).

The next perplexing problem is that of prenatal influence. Did the spotted sticks really produce spotted lambs and kids? Liberals use this incident to declare the account a myth. Some of the older commentaries take the approach that Jacob’s schemes really worked. One, for example, states that

ewes when seeing the spotted sticks “fancied the rams that leaped upon them were of those colors, and so conceived and brought forth the like.” But fantasies of the mind do not bring about genetically reproduced characteristics.

The Bible however, makes no such claim. It is true that Jacob believed his scheme had produced these results, but his actions actually did not affect the color of the coats at all. The Genesis account nowhere says that because the flocks conceived before the sticks therefore they brought forth the speckled and spotted offspring. It merely states “the flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle striped, speckled, and spotted” (30:39). Both were facts, but the one was not the cause of the other. Further, the English word “so” in 30:42 is the translation of the Hebrew “and,” and it should be thus translated in that verse. It need not imply any casual relationship in this context.

The answer is not found in Jacob’s scheming program, but in God’s sovereign providence. It was the providence of God that caused the ewes, though white, to bear spotted and striped young. That God had a part in the process is acknowledged by Laban (30:27), Jacob (31:5,7,9), the Angel of Jehovah (31:12), and Jacob’s wives (31:16).

It must be remembered that Laban’s flocks had been culled so that they were all white, but they were not all homozygous white (having only the white dominant genes). They were rather mostly heterozygous white (having both white dominant genes and colored recessive genes). Likewise, though his black rams had been removed, the rest of the rams would have been a mixture of homozygous (purebred) whites and heterozygous (hybrid) whites.

If homozygous (purebred) white sheep mated, all the offspring would be white. But if heterozygous white sheep mated, normally, of four lambs one would be pure white, two would be white, but with colored recessive genes, and one would be pure black. In Jacob’s dream all the rams who bred the ewes were “striped, speckled, and spotted.” We may thus conclude the following: (1) God allowed only the heterozygous rams to mate with the flocks. (2) In those matings, the genes imparted to the young were to a large degree the colored recessive genes, which provided the young with the rare colored coats.

Jacob would therefore receive a high proportion of those born to Laban’s ewes. Thus God in his providence did indeed bless Jacob as He had promised at Bethel.

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