

# LABAN AND JACOB

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Genesis 30:25ff. reports, apparently verbatim, a labor negotiation between Laban, employer, and Jacob, employee. The dialogue reveals a similarity that exists in this context in all times and all places, as well as the differences that characterize a specific time, location, and custom. To generalize broadly, one can recognize here a negotiation taking place in the Near East -- identifying the Near East as extending from the Euphrates around the eastern Mediterranean to the Sahara.

First, however, we must recognize that every negotiation, no matter how conventional, has a uniqueness. This one especially does, since not only status and money are involved, but family as well. Laban is a wealthy absentee husbandman, owner of livestock and property, who comes no more than once or twice a year to his fields, probably during the shearing or other festive occasion, to check on his holdings. As such, he sits in a place of honor, and after many ceremonial pleadings, deigns to taste from the delicacies brought to him by his shepherds -- figs, goat's milk, olives, and the like. After the traditional meal, the shepherds could approach and present the difficulties of their situation.

The first to do so, the one with special status because he is the husband of the master's two daughters, is Jacob. The propitious moment had arrived, as far as Jacob is concerned, *after Rachel had borne Joseph* (v. 25), to finance his own household. He approaches Laban, his employer of the past 14 years, who happens to be also his father-in-law. Tactically, Jacob attacks: '*Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served you, that I may go; for well you know what services I have rendered you.*'

Laban will not take this lying down, however. With a scornful and angry look, he bursts out '*If you will indulge me [lit.: if I have found favor in your eyes],*' that is to say in modern parlance, "Do me a favor, my friend, stop trying to confuse me. Let's set this straight." And he retorts to Jacob, *I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me on your account*' -- in other words, "You yourself did nothing, it was God's doing." Nevertheless, he adds with *ostensible* magnanimity and definiteness, '*Name the wages due*

*Aharon Pollak (1892-1960), a descendant of the famous 'Seer of Lublin' was a noted author and biblical commentator. His magnum opus מן המדבר אל המדבר elucidating difficult passages in the Psalms, was edited by Osnat Nizri. This article is a translation from the original Hebrew.*

from me and I shall pay you' (vv. 27-28). One would think that the negotiation is over, the employer had caved in without further words, but Jacob knows better. *But [Jacob] said, 'You know well how I have served you and how your livestock has fared with me' (v. 29). Why further argument? Was not Laban's magnanimous statement a promise to pay whatever Jacob reckons? No, it was not. Such language was merely a "come-on."*

Two generations earlier, far south of Paddan-Aram, at Hebron in the land of Canaan, Ephron had spoken to Abraham with a similar, probably conventional, magnanimous definiteness that both sides understood was not to be taken literally, but only as openers:

Ephron: *'I give you the field [of Machpela] and I give you the cave that is in it . . . . Bury your dead.'* '

Abraham: [understanding the language, not the words] *.'Let me pay the price of the land; accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.'*

Ephron: *'A piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver -- what is that between you and me?'*

And the Bible laconically reports: *Abraham accepted Ephron's terms* (vv. 11-16).

Laban's statement apparently is echoing a custom in the Near East: it is merely a signal that the boss will negotiate. "Make me an offer," Laban is saying in well-recognized obliquity. But the employee is not finished with the attempt to soften-up his employer before making his offer. Jacob picks up Laban's point about God's contribution to his prosperity, but turns it around, saying in effect that "I was not passive in this Divine act, but the major player." And, he adds a reminder that he is his son-in-law: He says: *'For the little you had before I came has grown to much, since the Lord blessed you **wherever I turned**. And now, when shall I make provision for my own household?'* (v. 30).

Laban realizes that there is no end to this dialogue and decides to bring the argument to a conclusion: *'What shall I pay you?'* he reiterates. *And Jacob said, 'Pay me nothing!'* (v. 31). The words make him out to be an unfortunate, a tactic intended to minimize a request that in reality is much more than it seems. On the other hand, Jacob sounds like a true Near Eastern negotiator, whose words mean somewhat the opposite to their definitions. Laban, fully aware of this of course, waits, and Jacob outlines his plans of dividing the flock between them according to the pattern of their fleece. After a quick

calculation that this is a final offer whereby he will get quite a bit too, *Laban said, 'Very well, let it be as you say'* (v. 34).

The Bible then describes the procedures Jacob followed to have the sheep produce mutations. At the end of the process, we are told, *the feeble ones went to Laban and the sturdy to Jacob* (v. 42). This took six years, and the original agreement rankled in the hearts of Laban and his sons. Noticing a changed attitude, Jacob calls his wives, explains the situation (including a synopsis of the original contract), and prepares them for secret departure.

Rachel steals her father's household gods and Laban uses this as an excuse to pursue Jacob and his family and to attempt to abrogate the contract. Jacob, unaware of Rachel's act but fully aware of Laban's real intention, finally displays anger (31:36). His remonstrance recalls his original case, plus very convincing rhetoric that he had not used before:

*'These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, not did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night . . . Of the twenty years I spent in your household, I served fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages time and again . . . (31:38-41).*

He concludes by broaching a point introduced by Laban six years before: the role of Abraham's God in their contractual relationship. Here Jacob cries that only the God that Laban himself had invoked prevented him from leaving Laban's household empty-handed!

In the Near East, contracts sometimes have a tendency to become unglued. Laban, ever displaying a low threshold of anger, tries to back out of the original arrangement with an astonishing statement that *the daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks* (31:43). Yet Laban the businessman knows to concede when he must; after all, Jacob and retinue have left his land -- it is folly to try to force them and the flocks to return. *'What can I do now,'* he sighs (v. 43), and he suggests a pact, with stones, a mound and a pillar to mark the spot. With this ceremony of irrevocable contract, the labor negotiation between Laban and Jacob had come to a truly final conclusion.