

Genesis 30:25–43 (NRSV)

When Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, “Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know very well the service I have given you.” But Laban said to him, “If you will allow me to say so, I have [become prosperous, seeing] that the LORD has blessed me because of you; name your wages, and I will give it.” Jacob said to him, “You yourself know how I have served you, and how your cattle have fared with me. For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?” Laban said, “What shall I give you?” Jacob said, “You shall not give me anything; if you will do this for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen.” Laban said, “Good! Let it be as you have said.” But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons; and he set a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban’s flock.

Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the rods. He set the rods that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the rods, and so the flocks produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and the completely black animals in the flock of Laban; and he put his own droves apart, and did not put them with Laban’s flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods, but for the feebler of the flock he did not lay them there; so the feebler were Laban’s, and the stronger Jacob’s. Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys.

Too Useful to Free

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Genesis 30:25–43

When last we saw Jacob and his family, they were experiencing the predictable jealousies and infighting that having more than one spouse creates. Since then, the sparring continued through the bearing of several more children. Each birth resulted in more conflict, especially because Rachel, his favored wife, remained barren. But at long last Rachel bore him a son, Joseph. I have spared you the details and skipped several verses.

But, of course, Jacob didn't get to skip any of it. And the years accumulated. He had gone to Paddam Aram to find a wife in his old home town. He found the woman he loved pretty quickly, but after that, nothing happened with alacrity. Jacob worked seven years for Rachel, but her father, Laban, switched brides on the wedding night, and Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah. Laban extorted another seven years of servitude from Jacob if he wanted Rachel.

Jacob now turns to Laban, fourteen years after his arrival in Padam Aram, and demands, "Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country." Jacob is quite aggressive here. He's had enough.

But Laban is ever the negotiator. He butters Jacob up with the truth. "If you will allow me to say so, I have become prosperous, seeing that the LORD has blessed me because of you; name your wages, and I will give it." Laban butters him up with the truth, but the truth is not always appealing. Laban says, I have prospered because of you. Then he says, Name your wages. And Laban knew full well that he owed Jacob no wages. Jacob may have made Laban prosper, but if he demanded to leave now, he would have simply fulfilled his fourteen year indenture. Jacob could leave now, but he would leave empty-handed. He would have to head south through the mountainous wilderness to go hundreds of miles back home, and he would have to travel through this rough and dangerous terrain with a huge family to feed and protect and not thing to his name. Laban could be lavish in his praise because he knew that under the law he owed Jacob nothing and Jacob couldn't leave with nothing and survive.

Jacob is over a barrel, and so as Gordon Wenham notes, he "makes a very modest suggestion that the mean Laban can hardly refuse. 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. What is more, Laban may remove all the multicolored animals to start with, so that Jacob will have only the white sheep and the dark goats to care for, all of which belong to Laban. Jacob will get only any multicolored lambs or kids subsequently born in that flock as his own.

As Jacob describes the arrangement, it does indeed look as though he is asking for nothing. Laban might well think that if he removes all the multicolored sheep and goats to start with, few multicolored lambs or kids would be born in the flock. Laban will be able to check

easily Jacob's honesty in keeping the agreement. Any white sheep or black goats in his flock will be Laban's; the multicolored will be Jacob's.¹

Jacob has fulfilled his fourteen years of servitude. Now that has finished his indenture he would normally work for wages. The going rate in ancient times for a shepherd was 20% of the newly born kids and lambs. Laban is laughing all the way to the bank. Multicolored offspring were much rarer than 20% in the flocks, and since Laban removed all the multicolored goats and sheep to start with, one could expect even fewer than normal in this arrangement which Jacob has proposed.

Indeed, Laban has his own sons move all the multicolored animals three days away so there is no possibility of interbreeding or of trickery by Jacob.

But Jacob, as we've seen since we've known him, has a few tricks up his sleeve, too. So, the first thing Jacob does is peel alternating strips from the bark of a poplar branches, so that they appeared as striped white and gray. Jacob put these striped branches in front of the watering places where the flock came to drink and breed. Then Jacob took all the multicolored animals and he made the pure-colored flocks look at them, too, when they bred. This doubled the visual suggestiveness—as the flocks bred they were looking at striped branches and speckled and striped animals. It seems that when the white sheep bred, Jacob also let them look at the black goats. It's all a little confusing, but the point is that Jacob used visual cues to make the animals produce a far higher proportion of variegated offspring than usual.

But Jacob isn't finished. In a move that relies on something a little more in line with modern genetics, Jacob lets only the best or strongest animals breed with these visual cues. The weaker animals he does not. So, the strongest of the breeding stock bear multicolored offspring while the weaker animals bear pure colored offspring, either dark or white. In the end, Jacob's flock grows both larger and more vigorous, while the flock that will belong to Laban is smaller and weaker than expected. Over time the results were impressive, and Jacob "grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys," says the text.

There's a lot of humor here. And there's a window into the bargaining and maneuvering culture that still exists in the Middle East. Today shopkeepers in the old style markets always want to bargain with you. In the end, it's not that they always make more money that way. It's more that it's something of a game. The better you play it, the less the shopkeeper may get from you, but the more the shopkeeper will respect or like you, when it's all over. It's a time-honored social interaction. Being good at it was highly prized in the ancient Middle East.

So Jacob and Laban play a game. At the beginning Laban thinks he's gotten the best of Jacob. Indeed, Jacob lets him think so. But then Jacob turns the tables and bests Laban. You can almost hear ancient shepherds laughing as they told such stories by campfires under the stars.

But, there is another, more serious, dimension to the story, too. God chose Abraham and promised him that he and his offspring would prosper. The story is also, then about how God keeps promises. Jacob may not be the most likeable guy in the world. He stole his brother's birthright and blessing. He has treated his wife Leah hurtfully. But he is among those to whom God has promised much and through whom God works out Biblical history. I find it comforting to know that God works through and with the likes of Jacob. It gives the rest of us some hope that God may work through us, too. God seems to make this point quite often in the Biblical narrative.

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 255.

Already the story has given us quite a bit to chew on. But there is one other meaning in the story is often overlooked. Jacob wants to leave, to return to the Promised Land. Laban doesn't want him to go. Why is that? Is it because Laban will miss his daughters and grandchildren? There's little reason to think so. Laban gives the reason himself. By Jacob's hand, Laban has prospered. Laban wants Jacob to stay simply because Jacob is so useful to him.

Think about it. If Jacob had produced ordinary or sub-par results as a shepherd, Laban would have sung a different tune. He would have said, "Jacob, my boy, you've got two wives, a couple of female slaves that I gave to my daughters, with the four of them you've had what is it now, eleven children? Don't you think it's time to go out on your own? Earn your own keep. What does the scripture say, my boy. I'll tell you what it says. It says a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. It doesn't say he shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his father-in-law.

The only reason that Laban doesn't want Jacob to go, the only reason he won't let Jacob go, is that Jacob is worth too much to him. This will become one of the most important themes in the Biblical story. Pharaoh won't let the Israelites leave Egypt, because their free labor is too useful to him. The Babylonians won't let the exiles go. The Babylonians have taken the cream of the population from Jerusalem, and the exiles are too useful to let them go.

And so we begin to see the insidious nature of the equation. The usefulness isn't mutual. Laban has been getting all the rewards of Jacob's work for fourteen years while Jacob has nothing, until he tricks Laban. The Israelites were oppressed in slavery in Egypt. Why? Because they were useful to Pharaoh. And the less Pharaoh gave them, the more useful they were. The exiles got little from Babylon. But they were useful to the Babylonians. In our own country the great injustice of slavery functioned in exactly the same way. Those who argued against freeing the slaves argued that they were too useful to free. The plantation owners maximized their profits if they gave the slaves just enough to keep them healthy enough to work. Wages or freedom would have made them less useful.

Today we struggle with such issues as raising the minimum wage. Why is raising the minimum wage a controversy? Simply because the lower wages are useful to those who reap the benefits of the low paid workers work.

Or why is it so hard to raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans? Simply because lower taxes are useful to the rich. In a trick worthy of Laban, the wealthy have successfully argued to keep them low by saying that expenditures on things that would help poor and middle income families are not useful, even destructive to the economy. But the truth is, these expenditures are vilified because it is more useful for the wealthy not to have to help pay for these things.

Against all this, the force of the Biblical narrative is clear. God is on the side of justice and fairness. Remember when Abraham and Lot stood in the Judean hills looking out over the land that was before them. They needed to separate because both of them had flourished. Abraham told Lot, Choose where you will go; I will go the other way. And what did Lot do? He looked down over the fertile Jordan valley and said to Abraham, I'll go there. Abraham was left with rough, rocky and dry hill country. But who prospered in the end? Lot got mixed up in the evil cities of the valley. But Abraham's flocks and stature grew.

God heard the Israelites cry out from under Pharaoh's heavy burden. And God delivered them with a mighty wind and an outstretched arm. Now, this world is not a simple or even straightforward place. The greedy and the oppressors don't always seem to lose, and many who have been treated unfairly go to their graves un-freed. But as Martin Luther King, Jr. was quick to say, the arc of the universe bends toward justice. We presently mark the 50th anniversary of his

march on Washington, a march calling for justice and freedom. King said the arc of the universe bent toward justice, and as a preacher he knew that the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel is there bending that arc for us.

In the end, we cannot, no one can, escape the fact that God loves fairness, justice and freedom; and God despairs at heartlessness, injustice and subjection. Said another way, what is useful for the rich and powerful is not how God measures what is good and right. God measures that by fairness and justice. Amen.