

## **Cunning or Blessing 9-30-07**

Genesis 30:25-31:13

The ancient city of Nuzi is the town of modern day Yorghana Tepe, Iraq. It is a special archeological site in that clay tablets have been discovered in the ruins of the homes of the former wealthy citizens of that city. 3,500 of these tablets tell of every day life around 1500 BC, not so long after story of Jacob.

The fascinating thing for us, as believers in the Bible, is the similar details of tradition and customs confirming that such things actually did exist in that time. The skeptics argue that the author is making these things up or that oral tradition was distorted through the centuries. The clay tablets of Nuzi tell us that is just not so.

Though Nuzi is a great distance from Haran, the Hurrians controlled both of these cities in the second millennium B.C. That would mean that we could expect traditions and customs to be similar. If the oral tradition passed down to Moses was accurate, we should expect to find similar names, traditions and customs.

In those ancient tablets, we find that a couple could adopt a servant as their heir if they were childless, which is just what we find Abram was considering with his servant Eliezer. (Genesis 15:2-3)

There are legal tablets that describe how an infertile wife could give her maidservant to her husband to have a child and then adopt the child as her own, thus giving them an heir. This is exactly what they tried with Hagar. (Genesis 16:1-4) It also shows that Leah and Rachel were following the traditions of their culture. See Genesis 30:1-13.

Tablets of marriage contracts show that if a father was not living, a brother could arrange the marriage of his sister. This is exactly what Laban did in Genesis 24. The contract by a father could not be refused by the daughter, but if it was done by a brother, the sister had the right to reject it. See Genesis 29:16-30. Laban had to ask Rebecca if she was willing to go.

Detractors of Scripture had argued that the mention of the gift of maidservants to Leah and Rachel were added much later. Where do they come up with all these arguments and why? The Nuzi tablets confirm that it was customary to give servants to a daughter that was marrying and to name the servant in the marriage contract. These many similarities and more show that Moses' account of the patriarchs who lived four centuries earlier is in keeping with the customs and traditions of that age and geography. Why am I not surprised? And when are Bible critics going to start acknowledging that archeology is only confirming the truth of Scripture?

Jacob had married the two daughters of Laban and now has eleven sons and a daughter. He had served his fourteen years as a bride-price for the two daughters, about 4 times the average, and now he wants to leave and start building his own wealth, so he asked his father-in-law for permission to go. <sup>25</sup> After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Send me on my way so I can go back to my own homeland." <sup>26</sup> Give me my wives

**Commented [notes1]:** 2 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"  
3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

**Commented [notes2]:** 1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar;  
2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.  
3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.  
4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

*and children, for whom I have served you, and I will be on my way. You know how much work I've done for you."*

Obviously there is some tension here. Customarily, the Father would give gifts to the daughters, but Jacob expects nothing. He just wants permission to go. Laban doesn't want him to go and has the manpower to stop him. Though he now has sons of his own to watch the flocks, he has observed that JHWH is blessing everything Jacob does. He knows he is getting wealthy because of Jacob. The NIV text says he knew that by divination. The word can also be translated "omen" or "by observation". Laban was an idolater, so we don't know why he declared the blessing came through JHWH. He probably added belief in JHWH to his list of gods just to be on the good side of all of them. Exactly how he determined that the blessing came through Jacob isn't clear, but simply looking at the increase of his net assets since Jacob began working for him would bring anyone to the same conclusion.

Does God always bless his children with wealth? It is a very popular theme with television evangelists. We know from one of the oldest books in the Bible, that is not always the case. Job declared, "The Lord gives and the LORD takes away." (Job 1:21) Moses said that it is the LORD that gives us the power to produce wealth. (Deuteronomy 8:18) Yet, we find that not every servant of God was wealthy. Many lived in poverty. Jesus possessed very little, and yet He had everything. (2 Corinthians 6:10) He told the rich young ruler to give away his wealth because it was a hindrance to him following the Lord. Wealth can be a blessing or a curse, but it is almost always the object of contention.

Laban answered Jacob's desire to earn a living for his family with the generous offer, "Name your wages and I will pay them." Thus begins the battle of the cons. In the next few verses the deal will be broken and renewed and eventually it will be changed ten times by Laban. Jacob has a plan, a scheme, to outwit his uncle.

First, he emphasized what Laban had already brought up. The flocks of Laban had increased greatly under his care. <sup>30</sup> *The little you had before I came has increased greatly, and the LORD has blessed you wherever I have been. But now, when may I do something for my own household?"*

Laban is on the spot. So he asked Jacob what he could give him. To Jacob, the term was offensive. He had not only paid the bride-price for both women generously and in full, but Laban had really had his wealth increased. "Don't GIVE me anything!" Emphasize the word "give". Jacob was going to make as generous an offer as he made for Rachel, only he thought he had a trick up his sleeve.

Normally, a shepherd would be paid ten to twenty percent of the sheep that were born in the flock, depending on the size of the flock. They would also make an agreement as to the milk and wool from the flock.

Here was Jacob's offer. <sup>32</sup> *Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages.* White is the dominant color gene in sheep. Thousands of

**Commented [notes3]:** 21 and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."

**Commented [notes4]:** 18 But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

**Commented [notes5]:** 10 sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

years of breeding for white wool have made the color genes even rarer. There is a variety of sheep that is making a comeback and you'll never guess its name, Jacob Sheep. Some believe that the origin of these sheep is estimated to be about 3000 years ago in the region of Syria. They are an odd sheep in that they often have four and even six horns. They are usually spotted and sometimes have striped horns. We can't say for certain that they are connected with this story but the similarities are fascinating.

Jacob was suggesting that he earn, not be given, all the sheep that weren't white and the goats that weren't solid in color. That is a small fraction, much less than the typical 10 or 20 percent that a shepherd would earn. Greedy Laban thought he was getting another great deal, similar to the deal for the bride-price, but Jacob is thinking about getting even. First of all, he knew that he would have to have some way to verify what was his. The coloration couldn't be changed and would assure his possession of those animals. He was locking Laban into a deal that he intended to turn around to his advantage. Laban walked away with a grin thinking he made the deal of the decade and that Jacob was a fool. (Proverbs 20:14)

Before he could even begin breeding the dark sheep to produce dark sheep, and speckled goats to get speckled goats, Laban removed all of those animals and took them three days journey away. These men knew genetics to some extent. Laban figured he'd just give Jacob white sheep to work with and increase his odds even more. This was contrary to the original agreement. We don't know why Jacob put up with it. Maybe he had no choice, or perhaps he thought he could still work the situation to his advantage.

Jacob took branches of trees that had white wood under the bark and peeled stripes of bark off and laid them in the water troughs. For some strange reason he thought that if he had the strong animals mate in front of those striped branches they would have striped offspring. He thought by looking at the stripes when they bred that they would produce striped offspring. We know from our understanding of genetics that this has nothing to do with it. But he was doing one thing scientifically whether he knew it or not. By choosing to breed the most vigorous sheep with the most vigorous and healthy sheep, he was more likely to get recessive genes to pair. Hybrids with recessive genes exhibit *heterosis* or hybrid vigor. In-breeding may produce the likelihood of white sheep being born white, but it also creates weaknesses (*homozygosity*). By carefully noticing which were healthier, he was actually identifying which were more likely to have recessive color genes that would pair up with others with recessive color genes. (Proverbs 16:9)

God allowed Jacob to think his superstition was doing something when all the while it was God at work blessing Jacob. That seems to be a dominant theme throughout the story of the patriarchs. They sin against God and man and God continues to have mercy on them and even bless them. He even blesses them when they think they are the clever ones that produced the wealth. (Jeremiah 10:23) God is so merciful!

Another practical thing that Jacob did was to separate his own flock. By having all speckled goats and colored sheep together, it was more likely that they would produce the same type of offspring, that is that two recessive genes would come out in the color variations that would make them his. <sup>43</sup> *In this way the man grew exceedingly*

**Commented [notes6]:** 14 "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.

**Commented [notes7]:** 9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

**Commented [notes8]:** 23 I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.

*prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys.*

If we were to stop here, we would be left with the idea that the Bible verified such strange breeding techniques. The next chapter will show us that isn't the case. God was the One that, in spite of Jacob thinking himself clever, caused the animal's genes to align in such a way as to bless Jacob. He became very wealthy, wealthy enough to branch out into herds of camels and donkeys and to hire servants. He reinvested his wealth and made more wealth. He took the blessing of God on his wages from Laban and purchased more opportunities for wealth to be made. (Proverbs 22:4)

**Commented [notes9]:** 4 Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.

When Jacob noticed his father-in-law was getting upset with his success, not getting what he thought he bargained for, <sup>3</sup> ... *the LORD said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."* As we'll see in a minute, Jacob was very relieved to get God's permission to get away from his father-in-law.

Everything is about to change. Jacob had become this successful in just six years. The sons of Laban were watching the sheep and goats that Laban took out of the flock six years ago, the ones that should have belonged to Jacob. Apparently they weren't as successful as Jacob, and they became jealous. They called the blessing of God on Jacob's work robbery. He was only supposed to get a small fraction of the sheep and goats that were born. Instead he was getting the bulk of the newborn animals. (Proverbs 10:22)

**Commented [notes10]:** 22 The blessing of the LORD brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it.

Jacob called his wives out to the fields where he was watching the flocks. <sup>6</sup> *You know that I've worked for your father with all my strength,* <sup>7</sup> *yet your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. However, God has not allowed him to harm me.* Now we get the big picture. I don't think he was exaggerating when he said his wages were changed ten times. It started with the wages paid for Rachel and ending up with Leah. It continued with the constant renegotiation of his wages. In spite of the fact that Laban intended on giving Jacob a fraction of what he was worth, and literally using him to make himself wealthy, he continued to change his wages when it didn't go his way.

<sup>8</sup> *If he said, 'The speckled ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks gave birth to speckled young; and if he said, 'The streaked ones will be your wages,' then all the flocks bore streaked young.* <sup>9</sup> *So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me.* Now we get the rest of the story. At first his wages were to be all the goats that weren't a solid color and the sheep that were dark. Then when they were mostly born that way it changed to the ones that were streaked and so on and so on. Jacob must have realized that it was more than his striped almond branch trick and here he declares it. *God has taken away your father's livestock!* He credited God's blessing not his cunning. (1Samuel 2:7) How did you get what you have?

**Commented [notes11]:** 7 The LORD sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.

When we finally realize that it is not by our own scheming or cunning but by the blessing of God that we are blessed, we find a great relief. (Psalm 29:11) You see, if we are always thinking that it was by our great wisdom or ability, we know deep in our heart that kind of thing is very fragile. Someone else can be wiser and more cunning. As vain as we can be, we still have a sense of insecurity knowing we doubt our own abilities. It doesn't matter how clever your plan is, it is still up to God.

**Commented [notes12]:** 11 The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

In preparing for the sermon I did some research on the breeding of sheep. With all the knowledge we have today about genes, some very mysterious coloring still takes place within flocks of sheep. In the final analysis, everything is in the hands of Almighty God. Jacob is getting a lesson in that fact. The angels were busy ascending and descending upon the genetic combinations in Laban's flock. They were busy bringing the Word of the LORD to Jacob. (Genesis 28:12)

As greedy and selfish as Laban was, he couldn't out maneuver God. He could try to use Jacob for his own selfish gain, but in the end, Jacob received what he had labored for and then some. Laban was punished for his selfishness, and Jacob was blessed for... for nothing, because God chose to. Do you realize God has chosen to bless you too? All He asks is that we come to Him. God chose Jacob to be the heir that received the promise. God chose to go with him and bless him. Now God has begun what He promised 20 years earlier, to bring him back to the land. (Genesis 28:15)

His wives answered him, <sup>16</sup> *Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you.*" They could see that God had blessed their husband and punished their father. They were ready to go. It seems there is no love lost. Laban's selfishness surely affected their relationship with him. His deceitfulness toward their husband couldn't have helped either.

I don't want to overly moralize the true story we have just gone over. It is a chapter in the narrative of God blessing the patriarchs and bringing the Seed that would bless the world. (Acts 3:25-26) That is the main message. In one sense, it is a foretelling what the nation of Israel will go through in their captivity in Egypt. (Genesis 15:13) They were oppressed by a tyrant but left with great wealth. They, too, ran for their lives. God rescued them both. This ultimately points to the true deliverer, Jesus, who delivers us from the tyrant Satan and captivity of the flesh. (John 8:36) We end up married and richly blessed like Jacob as he left for the Promised Land. (Revelation 19:7)

We may also learn that God is gracious with our arrogant thought of getting things by our own cunning. Jacob just wanted to even the score and get what he deserved, but God had something more in mind. He wanted to bless him. He wanted to mature him. He wanted him to know that it was God that was bringing the blessing and fulfilling His word to him. The same is true with us. Our expectations are often quite material and limited. God wants to bless us in ways that are greater than we can imagine. He wants to mature us too. He wants us to grasp the fact that He is the One who is blessing our life with His presence and fulfilling His word to us in Jesus. (2Peter 3:9)

God allows us to get into these kind of frustrating situations and sticks us there until we start to get it. For Jacob, it was a 20-year process. It wasn't his strength or his cunning or his hard work; it was the LORD fulfilling His word. But God is certainly not done teaching the lesson. In the next two weeks we'll see the reinforcement of the lesson. You see, even when we start to get it, we have to be reminded and have it reinforced or we drift back to our old self-reliance. (Malachi 3:7) Next week we will continue Jacob's journey and ours.

**Commented [notes13]:** 12 He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

**Commented [notes14]:** 15 I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

**Commented [notes15]:** 25 And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed."  
26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

**Commented [notes16]:** 13 Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.

**Commented [notes17]:** 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

**Commented [notes18]:** 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

**Commented [notes19]:** 9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

**Commented [notes20]:** 7 Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'