

done this, such action might deal with Laban's accusations and enable him to go on his way unaffected. However, we know more than he! The tension mounts further as Laban searched the tents of Jacob and Leah and the concubines, finally coming to Rachel.

The truth of what happened next is a mystery that we must allow Rachel to live with in the mists of time, but whatever her intentions and motives, her actions are regarded by generations of Israelite people as justified by the Lord. If Rachel lied about her period in order to protect her husband and ensure Laban did not search the camel mount (31:34) on which she sat, then she pulled off a particularly female form of trickery on a man and a father, who could never be seen publicly to disgrace a woman in her menstrual cycle. In this case, Rachel had the 'last laugh' on her husband. If Rachel truly did have her period, her sitting on the teraphim was a sign of contempt for what they stood for, and her actions were therefore justified before the living God!

Application

Sometimes, we can find these long stories of the Old Testament somewhat tedious, but they do tell us a great deal about humanity, and in a way that we do not find in the New Testament. In our story today, a trickster is defeated by trickery; an age-old story of what happens if you live your life by scheming and the manipulation of others. More than that, Laban put himself in the place of God over Jacob, and was originally intent on maintaining his domination. From this point of view, we must see this story as one of liberation from bondage and domination, and the elements of the story are valuable reminders of the way God works to set His people free. Firstly, God warned the dominator about his actions. Jacob could not have known this, but the warning God gave (31:24) served to cut Laban the bully down to size and make him vulnerable. Secondly, Jacob replied to Laban with an appeal to justice and truth (31:31) and although this is only a short reply in this passage, we will read much more about it tomorrow. Thirdly, if, like Rachel, you remove the symbols of power, then the edifice can come tumbling down.

I am not sure it is possible to take any moral lesson from Rachel's actions, and it may not be wise to accuse her of the godlessness of taking the teraphim into the Promised Land. It is sometimes suggested that Jacob's call to his household to 'put away the foreign gods' (35:2) before entering the Promised Land was a form of rebuke to Rachel, who died only a short time later in childbirth. The word for 'gods' in this later passage is, however, quite different, and Rachel's story in ch.35 is important for other reasons, not this. It is clear, however, that the Lord used what she did, under extreme circumstances, to bless her husband Jacob, the man who would become Israel.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Using a map at the end of your Bible, look at Jacob's journey from the Euphrates in the North to the Gilead hills near Canaan. What do you make of its timing?
2. Was Jacob deceptive by leaving Laban unannounced? Is trickery the always best answer to trickery?
3. Discuss your opinions about what Rachel's true attitude was towards the teraphim.

Discipleship

The exercise of domination of one person over another is a terrible thing, and contrary to the laws of God. Think about your own life and consider whether people have attempted to dominate you in an ungodly way, and also (which is more difficult) ask yourself whether you have exercised domination over anyone else in your own life. Whilst repentance from sin will be appropriate for any of us who have acted in domination over others, examine the text closely to see for yourself how God deals with people who dominate others.

Final Prayer

Save us, Heavenly Father, from the pain of family discord, and the disruption that this can bring. Help us to live in peace with those we hold most dear, and give us the courage to face problems and sort them out before difficult situations arise. AMEN

Prayer

Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the great gift of this day. As we go about our work, may we be challenged by the reminders of Your presence which are all around us; and strengthened by Your Holy Spirit to live in a manner that is worthy of our great calling through Jesus Christ. Make us ever conscious of the privilege of knowing You, our Saviour Jesus Christ; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The food we eat

In the food markets of today, vast amounts of food are pre-prepared as 'ready-meals' to be sold in supermarkets. To be safe for such commercial handling, these contain all kinds of additives. Please pray that we might be properly advised about what is safe and what is not.

Meditation

Your Word, Lord God, tells us that there is a time for everything

But You have ordained all things, and we do not know 'when'.

Then, typically, in a day we think we have organised well,

Something happens, and suddenly, imperceptibly, all is lost

And we are left in despair as our whole day becomes disorganised!

Yet in truth, the Lord's revealing of a 'time for everything'

Is not a prescription for everything that happens on this planet

Like a divine diary with all that happens in your life and mine,

Defined, timed, organised and directed; birth, life, death, and all.

'A time for everything' describes God's liberating, creating power:

It is 'order out of chaos'; the essential framework of our world,

Of all our lives; our history. All functioning with one vital, focus,

The Cross of Christ, salvation's all-embracing, all-changing moment;

The centre of our time and all eternity, defined by Him, for good.

Bible Study - Genesis 31:22-35

²² On the third day Laban was told that Jacob had fled. ²³ Taking his relatives with him, he pursued him for seven days and caught up with him near the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴ But that night God spoke to Laban the Aramean in a dream and warned him; 'Be careful not to threaten Jacob in any way.' ²⁵ Laban overtook Jacob, who had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban was camped with his relatives on the slopes of Gilead.

²⁶ Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done? You have tricked me and carried off my daughters like prisoners of war! ²⁷ Why did you steal away by deception and not tell me? I might have sent you away with joyful songs and the music of tambourines and lyres.

²⁸ You did not even let me kiss my daughters and grandchildren. You have been foolish.

²⁹ I have the power to harm you; but last night the God of your father said to me, "Be careful not to threaten Jacob in any way." ³⁰ Now, even though you left because you wanted to return to your father's house, why did you steal my gods?"

³¹ 'I was fearful' Jacob replied, 'thinking you would take your daughters away from me by force. ³² But if you find anyone with your gods, they shall not live. In the presence of our whole family, point out anything that I have that is yours, and take it' (but Jacob was unaware that Rachel had stolen the gods). ³³ So Laban searched Jacob's tent, and the tents of Leah and the two maids, without finding them. He left Leah's tent and entered Rachel's.

³⁴ Meanwhile Rachel had taken the gods and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. Laban searched everything in the tent, but did not find them.

³⁵ Then she said to her father, 'Don't be offended, my lord, for I cannot stand for you because I have my monthly period.' So he searched, but did not find the gods.

Review

We have all experienced times when some long-running dispute in which we have been involved comes to a head, and the situation has to be faced directly, with words spoken for good or ill as a consequence of everything that has happened. These can be fearsome occasions, for what happens often colours the future for a long time. The reading today describes the climactic moment when Jacob's long-running dispute with Laban came out into the open. Up to this point, Jacob has held his tongue with profound patience and allowed his actions and God's blessing to 'do the talking'; but here, Laban caught up with Jacob's camel train, together with his flocks and herds, and confronted Jacob. The full weight of Jacob's reply comes in the speech that is part of tomorrow's text; but here, he waited for Laban to make his accusations and then make a fool of himself in front of everyone.

In the long story of Jacob's time in Haran living with Laban, his father-in-law had been shown up to be a man so greedy that he tricked Jacob on his wedding night, and attempted to defraud Jacob out of every proper means of payment for his work. When he then caught up with Jacob on his journey back to Canaan and accused him of trickery and stealing, it sounds hollow! His two direct accusations were that he was tricked by Jacob's removal of the family without his knowledge (31:26) and then that his 'teraphim' (small models of ancestors and gods used for divining, or predicting the future, otherwise called 'household gods') had been stolen. He did not say that any of the sheep or cattle that Jacob had with him were stolen, which, because of their value, was probably the main reason for his pursuit of Jacob. It is possible that Laban wanted to discredit Jacob with the smaller accusations first, and having won that argument, he would have reclaimed all he regarded as own, which was probably everything. It was Rachel's action that effectively saved the day!

The incident of Rachel's stealing of her father's 'teraphim', has caused widespread comment over the years, even the accusation that she took them because she was herself using them for divining, contrary to the will of God. In reality, the story line depends on our understanding that Rachel's deceit is presented as no more or less than Laban deserves in recompense for his own trickery over Rachel's own marriage to Jacob which he ruined (29:21-30); and there are other more fascinating aspects of this story which we will uncover later on in the study.

As in the earlier part of Genesis 31 which we studied yesterday, it is God who is in control of these events. Jacob set out in direct obedience to God's call; it was his 'act of faith' to compare with his grandfather's setting out for Canaan in the first place (12:1f.). Throughout the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God was always willing to use the people around those he had chosen in order to accomplish His will. Here, he used Laban by speaking him directly before he caught up with Jacob (31:24) and telling him to act with caution. He also used Rachel, because her actions, even though they were deceptive, vindicated her husband before everyone (31:32,35). This vindication gave Jacob the courage to confront Laban himself; in a fascinating speech that we will read tomorrow.

Going Deeper

Jacob's flight to Canaan in obedience to God was a difficult journey, as the details of the text explain. Laban's accusations show him up to be a fool, but they depend upon our understanding of why Rachel stole and hid the 'teraphim'. You may be surprised by what we can discover about what this means!

The flight from Mesopotamia

There is little doubt that Laban set off to pursue Jacob intent upon bringing him and all his family and flocks back to Haran in Mesopotamia, for he brought with him 'his relatives' (31:22) which was shorthand for a band of his sons and their servants. His approach to Jacob was not peaceful, and reminds us of the way in which Abraham, years previously, had gathered a band of his own men in order to fight some local kings and rescued Lot. (Gen 14). In the ancient nomadic world, it was a declaration of war.

There is some dispute about the timing of everything in verses 21 to 25. Jacob would have had to travel more than three hundred miles from the river Euphrates (31:21) to the Gilead hills, a journey of more than a month driving sheep and goats at the normal rate of 6 – 10 miles per

day. We are told the Laban set off 'on the third day' (31:22) and pursued Jacob 'for seven days' (31:23) which makes it appear as if Jacob had travelled for just ten days. There are too many assumptions involved in this, however, for it is quite unclear what 'the third day' refers to, and Laban's pursuit over a week may well have been accurately described, relative to the length of the journey, but no real assumptions can be made about how long Jacob had fled. Also, in later stories of Jacob, it is clear that he knew about the value of separating the flocks from the family (33:1f.) and whilst Jacob may have reached the slopes of Gilead, nothing is said of the whereabouts of the flocks. Indeed, the focus of the whole story is on Jacob's flight from Laban and the stealing of the teraphim.

The Lord's hand was on the whole situation, however, and he spoke to Laban in such a way as to hold him back. Although Laban was related to Abraham he was not one of God's chosen people, but he was a religious man, as was everyone in those days. A dream was sufficient evidence to him that God was protecting Jacob, but that was not going to stop him venting his wrath. His original plan to attack and take Jacob's flocks and family therefore had to be set aside and was dependent upon his success in accusing Jacob of deception and stealing.

Laban's accusations

It is farcical to read what Laban spoke in anger to Jacob! Almost all the words he spoke were used by the story teller of the narrative to make fun of him and point to his double standards. His first words 'What have you done' (31:26) are identical to those that Jacob said to Laban on the morning after his wedding night when he discovered that Laban had tricked him into marrying Leah! (29:25). Secondly, he said 'You have tricked me and carried off my daughters like prisoners of war!' (31:26) This is comical, for we all know that it was Laban who had been tricking Jacob all along. It may have been God's punishment on Jacob for his own trickery when he was a younger man (25:29f. 27:1f.), but this was not Laban's business, it was God's, and the Lord was exposing Laban as the greedy trickster in front of everyone.

The irony of the whole situation is exposed by the fact that we who read the story already know (31:14f.) that Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, both agreed to go with their husband willingly, and were now free with their husband. It was while they were with their father that they were bound and captive. Their husband gave them a choice about what they should do; their father merely presumed his right to keep his daughters as he wished. Laban, in truth, was typical of those who use culture for their own ends. He expected the cultural norm whereby his daughters stayed within his extended family, but he had never displayed any other respect of cultural norms, such as in the return of 'bride-price' quoted by Rachel and Leah as the reason for their leaving (31:15).

As for a family feast of celebration when they left (31:27), this suggestion was cynical, for we all know that Laban would have never allowed that to happen. Laban's idea of a party was previously experienced only once; his bridal party for Rachel at which he swapped her for Leah. Who would have believed that he would not attempt any trick to achieve his way! However, the Scriptures now present us with a great irony involving trickery. This is the story of how Rachel, the younger sister who was tricked, proceeded to trick her father.

The story of the teraphim

Having made his laughable general accusations, Laban then played what he thought was his trump card. He accused Jacob of stealing his teraphim. These objects of divination (see above) were normally kept by the most senior man in a nomadic family group, as symbols of power. They were Laban's tools of religious manipulation which, in a religious world where the one true God had not revealed Himself to others as He did to Abraham, these 'teraphim' or 'gods' were the religious playthings of the powerful and rich, such as Laban. Indeed, this fact may well have prompted Rachel to steal the teraphim in the first place; for her it was an act of contempt for her father and his mistreatment of her. We too easily forget that she was the one who was cheated on her wedding night, not just Jacob.

We who read the story know that Rachel has stolen these wooden teraphim, yet the Scriptural story-writer winds up the tension by describing how Jacob reacts with indignity to the suggestion that he or anyone else in his family has stolen the teraphim. He makes the wild promise that anyone caught with them will be killed, for from his point of view, if a servant had