



### **GENESIS 31-33 THE TERAPHIM; GOD TESTS JACOB IN A WRESTLING MATCH**

After having spent twenty years in the northern Syrian city of Haran, God told Jacob, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed the pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now arise, *get out of this land, and return to the land of your family*" (Genesis 31:13).

Jacob knew leaving Haran would mean having a clash with Laban, his father-in-law, who was envious because of his increasing wealth. But instead of trusting God, Jacob again resorted to trickery and still being faithful to his name that can mean *trickster*.

The Bible says, "And Jacob stole away, unknown to Laban the Syrian, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. So he fled with all that he had. He arose and crossed the river [the Euphrates River], and headed toward the mountains of Gilead" (Gen. 31:20-21). This decision would have been catastrophic to Jacob if God had not intervened again. Deceiving Laban also led to another law broken, since Rachel, without telling Jacob, took advantage of her father's absence while he was shearing sheep and stole his household gods. Jacob's family fled Haran and had a three-day head start before Laban found out and set off with his men in hot pursuit. After seven days of grueling pursuit, a furious Laban is about to overtake Jacob and give him his just deserts when God intervenes in a dream and warns him not to harm Jacob.

So Laban calmed down and came to Jacob, saying: "What have you done, that you have stolen away unknown to me, and carried away my daughters like captives taken with the sword? Why did you flee away secretly, and not tell me, for I might have sent you away with you and songs, with timbrel and harp. And you did not allow me to kiss my sons and my daughters. Now you have done foolishly in so doing. *It is in my power to do you harm*, but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Be careful that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad. And now you have surely gone because you greatly long for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?'" (31:26-30).

We see in this conversation a typical Middle East custom that still exists, as in many parts of the world, about dealing with confrontations. The key

concept here, above all, is to *save face*. So Laban makes himself out to be the victim and does not admit his responsibility in any of this, but rather, reprimands Jacob for thinking he would not want them to leave. Jacob, on the other hand, does not want to embarrass Laban, so he meekly replies he was afraid he would take his daughters by force if he knew he was planning to leave him, and then denies having stolen the household gods. To prove it, he says he is willing to put to death anyone who had stolen them.

Laban begins the search, and when he enters Rachel's tent, she is innocently sitting on top of a camel saddle. He insists on looking underneath, but she refuses, saying she was in her menstrual cycle. So Laban is unable to find them and gives up the search. Why were these household gods, called teraphim, so important?

Archaeology has helped us understand the probable significance of these household statues mentioned in the famous Nuzi Tablets. *Harper's Bible Dictionary* mentions, "The teraphim, or figurines representing household gods were common in Syria and Palestine, even among Israelites....In Gen. 31:19, Rachel stole her father's teraphim. Laban's angry reaction suggests their importance. According to many ancient and modern interpreters, talismanic, cultic, and legal significance accrued to their possession. Their function as *title* to Laban's estate cannot be ruled out." Another commentary adds, "Rachel's taking the teraphim from her father was probably much more serious than we had imagined. The possession of those household gods implied *leadership* of the family, which meant that Jacob was going to inherit everything Laban had! That is the reason Laban was so wrought up over it. He surely did not want Jacob to get his estate--he felt he had gotten too much already" (J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*).

So, Rachel and Leah had been very concerned that by leaving Laban they would lose their rights to their inheritance (see Gen. 31:14-16). But by having the teraphim, they assured their and their children's rights to Laban's extensive estate when he died

An argument then ensued between Jacob and Laban, where Jacob defended his right to keep his own possessions and brought up all of Laban's

injustices (31:36-42). Laban disputed this, insisting that, as the patriarch, everything was still his. He said, “These daughters are *my* daughters, and these children are *my* children, and this flock is *my* flock; all you see is *mine*. But what can I do this day to these my daughters or to their children whom they have borne? Now therefore, come, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me” (31:43-44).

This, in effect, became a peace treaty between the two. Laban was very concerned that if the teraphim were in his daughter’s possession, upon his death, they could come back and claim his estate since Leah was the first-born, next was Rachel, and then Jacob as the son-in-law. The other children Laban had afterwards would hardly get anything, so he wanted to make sure they would not come back to Haran. He mentions two parts of this covenant, but to save face, puts the real reason at the very end: 1) “If you afflict my daughters, or if you take other wives besides my daughters, although no man is with us—see, God is witness between me and you (31:50).” 2) This heap [of stones] is a witness that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and *you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me*, for harm” (31:52). So ends the difficult relationship between Jacob and Laban, but Jacob is still not out of the woods. He now has to face the wrath of his brother Esau. He knows the last time he saw him, his brother was furious and plotting to kill him. How would Esau react now? Would he avenge all the grievances he had against Jacob?

So, what did Jacob do? As many examples in the Bible, Jacob was a man *of prayer* and *of action*. He didn’t just sit back and wait for events to unfold. He first established a strategy to have the best chance for success. He needed more information, so he sent scouts to Esau to feel him out and mention he was arriving and bringing gifts to him. But the messengers foolishly only saw Esau leaping up with excitement and rounding up his 400 men to meet Jacob and did not perceive whether he was excited in the right or the wrong way. Arriving back, they only told Jacob that his brother was coming. The Bible says, “So Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed” (32:7). He then divided his group into two bands, so if one was being attacked, the other could escape. As Esau neared, it was a wonder Jacob did not have a heart attack from all the stress.

The Bible, as does a good movie, certainly knows how to build up the suspense until the very end!

Next, Jacob said a fervent prayer, reminding God of His promises of protecting and multiplying him. It is a beautiful prayer that teaches us several principles. He said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you.’ *I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth* which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. For You said, ‘I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as he sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude’” (32:9-12).

Notice the first lesson--despite the difficulties, Jacob truly humbled himself before God. Never should we go before God with a presumptuous or bad attitude. Then, he gently reminded God of the promises He had made, and that he trusted Him to keep His word. He mentioned how much he appreciated the truths God had revealed, and then petitioned Him for protection and grace before his brother. So when we face difficult times Jacob’s prayer give us principles to use in these situations.

He then went into action again, rounding up 550 animals that he would Esau as a present and then he taking his family and some possessions to a safe place across the Jabbok River.

Having done all he could, he now waited, wondering what the outcome of all of this would be. Now was the time God decided to test Jacob, as He had his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. He also had great plans for Jacob, but needed to test his first. He would test Jacob’s true endurance in following him, but instead of having to show he was willing to sacrifice a son, as his grandfather Abraham had done, now the trial consisted of testing his spiritual and physical endurance. Since Jacob had told Laban he had served him “with all his might” (Gen. 31:6), God would now see if Jacob would serve Him in the same way, with that much resolve.

The Bible describes the world’s most important wrestling match, “Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day.

Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, 'Let Me go, for the day breaks.' But he said, 'I will not let You go unless You bless me!' So He said to him, 'What is your name? He said, 'Jacob.' And He said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel men, for you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked, saying, 'Tell me Your name, I pray.' And He said, 'Why is it that you ask about My name?' And He blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel [literally, Face of God], 'For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.' Just as he crossed over Peniel the sun rose on him, and he limped on his hip. Therefore to this day the children of Israel do not eat the muscle that shrank, which is on the hip socket, because He touched the socket of Jacob's hip in the muscle that shrank" (32:24-32).

Who did Jacob wrestle? If it had only been with an angel, it would not have been so serious to have seen him at daylight, as many other humans have done. But Jacob himself said he saw *God* face to face, and although it was dark, he managed to see the silhouette. Moreover, God Himself said, "... for you have struggled *with God* and with men and have prevailed" (32:28). In Hosea 12:3, we read, "He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and in his strength *he struggled with God*."

Jacob proved he had the perseverance God was looking for and that he was not a quitter. So God changed Jacob's name to Israel. *The Evangelical Commentary* mentions, "As with Abraham in chapter 17, a new name indicates a new destiny. The first evidence of real spiritual transformation in Jacob's life is that he receives *a new name*. The name means 'prevailer with God' and finally Jacob had his onerous name changed, which had meant, heel-grabber, supplanter or, trickster."

From now on, this would be the name that would characterize the people of God in the Old and the New Testament. A true Christian is a person who becomes a "prevailer before God" and a "spiritual Israelite" through baptism and the laying on of hands. This is when a firm commitment is done to "wrestle" against the world and never be a quitter (see Romans 11:17-24). In other words, he or she are the ones who prevails against the world before God. Christ later mentions, "And from the

days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of God suffers violence [a spiritual wrestling match is taking place (2 Cor. 10:3-6] and the violent [or prevailers] take it by force" (Matthew 11:12). That is why God emphasizes over and over that we must become "overcomers" – of ourselves, the world, and Satan, our adversary.

God is not a respecter of persons, and as he tested Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to see what kind of spiritual character they were developing as they followed and obeyed Him, so He does with us. We are going to be tried over and over, for He has a wonderful kingdom waiting for us in the future as a reward, but has to ensure those who will teach and lead others will first be faithful to the end, and not be quitters. As Christ said, "And he who *overcomes*, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations" (Revelation 2:26). Jacob finally prevailed, and was made into a "new man," just as we will some day (Rev. 2:17).

Continuing with the narrative, at the end of this section there is a tradition about not eating the thigh tendon because of this wrestling match. *The Critical and Expository Commentary* mentions, "This is the nerve that fastens the thigh bone in its socket. The practice of the Jews in abstaining from eating this in the flesh of animals, is not based on the law of Moses, but is merely a tradition. The sinew is carefully extracted; and where there are no persons skilled enough for that operation, they do not make use of the hind legs at all." Being *only a tradition* and not a law, it is not necessary for Christians to do it, but those of Jewish background can if they want.

Fortunately, the encounter with Esau is very peaceful, and after initially refusing Jacob's gifts, Esau accepts and volunteers to follow him to his new location. Jacob wisely defers, knowing Esau's mercurial spirit and not wanting any more risks. Esau returned to his home in Seir (33:16) and Jacob settled down in Shechem, bought some land, and set up an altar to honor God.

Many new, and sad adventures, await Jacob, and he still has a long way to go before being perfected.