

Jacob's Rise In Laban's House

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When Jacob stumbled into Laban's matrimonial net, he came out with two wives and a commitment to work seven more years for his second wife, Rachel (Genesis 29:25-28). Not many servants are able to work their way to freedom from a master intent upon keeping them in economic bondage. Yet, within six years, after completing his "dowry" service for Rachel, Jacob had incurred the wrath of Laban's sons by recruiting an estimated five hundred of the best of Laban's servants* to care for some twenty thousand head** of livestock Jacob acquired in astute wage agreements with Laban (Genesis 31:1).

Jacob's meteoric rise economically prompts many to sympathize with Laban's sons. He is portrayed as liar and a schemer seeking economic gain by all means fair or foul. This stereotype, however, is at odds with the social facts revealed in the Bible about our father Jacob. The Bible offers no criticism of Jacob's business dealings in Haran except from the exploiter Laban and his sons. Further, God averted a fratricidal war between the servants of Laban and Jacob, by appearing to Laban, saying, "Take thou heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad" (Genesis 31:29). As Solomon later observed, "When a man's ways please the LORD, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7).

Jacob's servants were loyal and competent. At Jacob's command they pulled up stakes and were on the road three days before Laban learned of their leaving (Genesis 31:17-22). Their silent armed presence was also a factor in restraining Laban who to the end loudly asserted regarding Jacob's family and possessions "These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle" (Genesis 31:43). Finally, Jacob's servants had a respect for their father Jacob that is unheard of today. Centuries after the death of Jacob, Israelites still observed their expensive custom of setting aside a joint of meat to commemorate Jacob's wrestling with God (Genesis 32:24-32).

* This estimate presumes that Esau's four hundred soldiers (Genesis 32:6) would have attacked Israel if they had not been outnumbered by Jacob's armed servants. These circumcised saints, like subsequent rebuilders of Jerusalem's walls, were ready to protect their families at all costs (Nehemiah 4:14).

** Twenty thousand head of livestock is a minimum number needed to employ some five hundred servants and their dependents. This low estimate also helps explain how Jacob could give away over five hundred head of cattle when negotiating with Esau without "bankrupting" his household. (Genesis 32:13-16).