

JACOB'S FIGHT WITH LABAN
Gen 30,25-32,1

Prayer

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping when we remembered Zion. ² On the poplars of that land we hung up our harps. ³ There our captors asked us for the words of a song; Our tormentors, for a joyful song: "Sing for us a song of Zion!" ⁴ But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land? ⁵ If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither. ⁶ May my tongue stick to my palate if I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem beyond all my delights.

/Psalm 137,1-6/

Introduction

Life abroad and dealing with other people always bring many challenges: people think and act differently from each other. If this is combined with their own dishonesty it makes matters even worse. What can be suggested in situations such as these is complete faithfulness to God and total self-engagement.

Our text speaks about Jacob who has cheated his older brother Esau and now is having a difficult time defending himself from being cheated by Laban. This episode will provide interesting insights in his story and offer inspiration for us.

Text

After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban: "Give me leave to go to my homeland. ²⁶ Let me have my wives, for whom I served you, and my children, too, that I may depart. You know very well the service that I have rendered you." ²⁷ Laban answered him: "If you will please.... "I have learned through divination that it is because of you that God has blessed me. ²⁸ So," he continued, "state what wages you want from me, and I will pay them." ²⁹ Jacob replied: "You know what work I did for you and how well your livestock fared under my care; ³⁰ the little you had before I came has grown into very much, since the LORD'S blessings came upon you in my company. Therefore I should now do something for my own household as well." ³¹ "What should I pay you?" Laban asked. Jacob answered: "You do not have to pay me anything outright. I will again pasture and tend your flock, if you do this one thing for me: ³² go through your whole flock today and remove from it every dark animal among the sheep and every spotted or speckled one among the goats. Only such animals shall be my wages. ³³ In the future, whenever you check on these wages of mine, let my honesty testify against me: any animal in my possession that is not a speckled or spotted goat, or a dark sheep, got there by theft!" ³⁴ "Very well," agreed Laban. "Let it be as you say." ³⁵ That same day Laban removed the streaked and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats, all those with some white on them, as well as the fully dark-colored sheep; these he left... in charge of his sons. ³⁶ Then he put a three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob continued to pasture the rest of Laban's flock.

³⁷ Jacob, however, got some fresh shoots of poplar, almond and plane trees, and he made white stripes in them by peeling off the bark down to the white core of the shoots. ³⁸ The rods that he had thus peeled he then set upright in the watering troughs, so that they would be in front of the animals that drank from the troughs. When the animals were in heat as they came to drink, ³⁹ the goats mated by the rods, and so they brought forth streaked, speckled and spotted kids. ⁴⁰ The sheep, on the other hand, Jacob kept apart, and he set these animals to face the streaked or fully dark-colored animals of Laban. Thus he produced special flocks of his own, which he did not put with Laban's flock. ⁴¹ Moreover, whenever the hardier animals were in heat, Jacob would set the rods in the troughs in full view of these animals, so that they mated by the rods; ⁴² but with the weaker animals he would not put the rods there. So the feeble animals would go to Laban, but the sturdy ones to Jacob. ⁴³ Thus the man grew increasingly prosperous, and he came to own not only large flocks but also male and female servants and camels and asses. **31:1** Jacob learned that Laban's sons were saying, "Jacob has taken everything that belonged to our father, and he has accumulated all this wealth of his by using our father's property." ² Jacob perceived, too, that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had previously been. ³ Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers, where you were born, and I will be with you." ⁴ So Jacob sent for Rachel and Leah to meet him where he was in the field with his flock. ⁵ There he said to them: "I have noticed that your father's attitude toward me is not as it was in the past; but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶

You well know what effort I put into serving your father; ⁷ yet your father cheated me and changed my wages time after time. God, however, did not let him do me any harm. ⁸ Whenever your father said, 'The speckled animals shall be your wages,' the entire flock would bear speckled young; whenever he said, 'The streaked animals shall be your wages,' the entire flock would bear streaked young. ⁹ Thus God reclaimed your father's livestock and gave it to me. ¹⁰ Once, in the breeding season, I had a dream in which I saw mating he-goats that were streaked, speckled and mottled. ¹¹ In the dream God's messenger called to me, 'Jacob!' 'Here!' I replied. ¹² Then he said: 'Note well. All the he-goats in the flock, as they mate, are streaked, speckled and mottled, for I have seen all the things that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³ I am the God who appeared to you in Bethel, where you anointed a memorial stone and made a vow to me. Up, then! Leave this land and return to the land of your birth.'" ¹⁴ Rachel and Leah answered him: "Have we still an heir's portion in our father's house? ¹⁵ Are we not regarded by him as outsiders? He not only sold us; he has even used up the money that he got for us! ¹⁶ All the wealth that God reclaimed from our father really belongs to us and our children. Therefore, do just as God has told you." ¹⁷ Jacob proceeded to put his children and wives on camels, ¹⁸ and he drove off with all his livestock and all the property he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. ¹⁹ Now Laban had gone away to shear his sheep, and Rachel had meanwhile appropriated her father's household idols. ²⁰ Jacob had hoodwinked Laban the Aramean by not telling him of his intended flight. ²¹ Thus he made his escape with all that he had. Once he was across the Euphrates, he headed for the highlands of Gilead. ²² On the third day, word came to Laban that Jacob had fled. ²³ Taking his kinsmen with him, he pursued him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴ But that night God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream and warned him, "Take care not to threaten Jacob with any harm!" ²⁵ When Laban overtook Jacob, Jacob's tents were pitched in the highlands; Laban also pitched his tents there, on Mount Gilead. ²⁶ "What do you mean," Laban demanded of Jacob, "by hoodwinking me and carrying off my daughters like war captives? ²⁷ Why did you dupe me by stealing away secretly? You should have told me, and I would have sent you off with merry singing to the sound of tambourines and harps. ²⁸ You did not even allow me a parting kiss to my daughters and grandchildren! What you have now done is a senseless thing. ²⁹ I have it in my power to harm all of you; but last night the God of your father said to me, 'Take care not to threaten Jacob with any harm!' ³⁰ Granted that you had to leave because you were desperately homesick for your father's house, why did you steal my gods?" ³¹ "I was frightened," Jacob replied to Laban, "at the thought that you might take your daughters away from me by force. ³² But as for your gods, the one you find them with shall not remain alive! If, with my kinsmen looking on, you identify anything here as belonging to you, take it." Jacob, of course, had no idea that Rachel had stolen the idols. ³³ Laban then went in and searched Jacob's tent and Leah's tent, as well as the tents of the two maidservants; but he did not find the idols. Leaving Leah's tent, he went into Rachel's. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the idols, put them inside a camel cushion, and seated herself upon them. When Laban had rummaged through the rest of her tent without finding them, ³⁵ Rachel said to her father, "Let not my lord feel offended that I cannot rise in your presence; a woman's period is upon me." So, despite his search, he did not find his idols. ³⁶ Jacob, now enraged, upbraided Laban. "What crime or offense have I committed," he demanded, "that you should hound me so fiercely? ³⁷ Now that you have ransacked all my things, have you found a single object taken from your belongings? If so, produce it here before your kinsmen and mine, and let them decide between us two. ³⁸ "In the twenty years that I was under you, no ewe or she-goat of yours ever miscarried, and I have never feasted on a ram of your flock. ³⁹ I never brought you an animal torn by wild beasts; I made good the loss myself. You held me responsible for anything stolen by day or night. ⁴⁰ How often the scorching heat ravaged me by day, and the frost by night, while sleep fled from my eyes! ⁴¹ Of the twenty years that I have now spent in your household, I slaved fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, while you changed my wages time after time. ⁴² If my ancestral God, the God of Abraham and the Awesome One of Isaac, had not been on my side, you would now have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my plight and the fruits of my toil, and last night he gave judgment." ⁴³ Laban replied to Jacob: "The women are mine, their children are mine, and the flocks are mine; everything you see belongs to me. But since these women are my daughters, I will now do something for them and for the children they have borne. ⁴⁴ Come, then, we will make a pact, you and I; the LORD shall be a witness between us." ⁴⁵ Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a memorial stone. ⁴⁶ Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather some stones." So they got some stones and made a mound; and they had a meal there at the mound. ⁴⁷ Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob named it Galeed. ⁴⁸ "This mound," said Laban, "shall be a witness from now on between you and me." That is why it was named Galeed-- ⁴⁹ and also Mizpah, for he said: "May the LORD keep watch

between you and me when we are out of each other's sight.⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters, or take other wives besides my daughters, remember that even though no one else is about, God will be witness between you and me."⁵¹ Laban said further to Jacob: "Here is this mound, and here is the memorial stone that I have set up between you and me."⁵² This mound shall be witness, and this memorial stone shall be witness, that, with hostile intent, neither may I pass beyond this mound into your territory, nor may you pass beyond it into mine.⁵³ May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor (their ancestral deities) maintain justice between us!" Jacob took the oath by the Awesome One of Isaac.⁵⁴ He then offered a sacrifice on the mountain and invited his kinsmen to share in the meal. When they had eaten, they passed the night on the mountain. **32:1** Early the next morning, Laban kissed his grandchildren and his daughters goodbye; then he set out on his journey back home,

/Gn 30,25-32,1/

Setting in Jacob's story

This long text has to be seen as a part of the larger Jacob's story. It follows almost immediately after the narration about Abraham in the Book of Genesis: Isaac is treated almost superficially. The main episodes from Jacob's life are as follows:

- birth with his twin-brother Esau (Jacob is younger but tries to pass Esau);
- Jacob steals the birthright from his brother and his father's blessing;
- For fear of his brother, Jacob flees to Haran to his family and intends to find a wife for himself among his relatives;
- Jacob's dream at Bethel on a sacred site;
- Jacob arrives in Haran and is welcomed by his uncle Laban;
- Jacob marries Leah and Rachel and serves Laban for 20 years;
- Jacob's sons are born;
- **Jacob fights with Laban for a right share of property;**
- **Jacob escapes from Laban to turn to Canaan;**
- Jacob meets with his brother Esau;
- Jacob and his children (as a part of the story of Joseph);

A larger context for understanding of this story is provided by the world of the patriarchs and there are several cross references to the Jacob-Esau controversy about the birthright, paternal blessing and property.

Lectio

25a. "After Rachel gave birth to Joseph" This time reference is important for several reasons: as soon as the first child is born to Jacob's beloved wife (Rachel), he starts thinking about going home. Since it is difficult to squeeze the birth of 6 sons and one daughter by Leah to 6 years, the time-setting might be an approximation.

25b-26. Jacob said to Laban: "Give me leave to go to my homeland. ²⁶ Let me have my wives, for whom I served you, and my children, too, that I may depart. You know very well the service that I have rendered you."

In his first speech, Jacob is expressing himself in a very direct way. The text uses imperatives without a "please," showing Jacob's determination. The reason he is asking to get his wives and children to go with him reflects the norm from Ex 21,3-6: if a slave receives a wife from his master, the wife and their children are his master's property even when the slave leaves. It is almost like if the wife were borrowed to him for temporal use. Jacob works as a slave here with no fair wage; he has nothing and even his wife and children belong to his uncle. He reminds Laban of all the service done for him (7 + 7 + 6 years) (29,18.27; 31,38).

At the same time, the Mosaic Law required the release of fellow Hebrew (slave) after 7 years of service and not empty-handed to prevent successive poverty (Deut 15,13-14). This measure was intended to guarantee social justice.

27-28. "Laban answered him: "If you will please.... "I have learned through divination that it is because of you that God has blessed me. ²⁸ So," he continued, "state what wages you want from me, and I will pay them.""

The way Laban answers reflects the oriental way of courtesy and cunning. Seemingly being favorable towards Jacob, he delays giving him answer on his request. More important is his statement of becoming rich and blessed through Jacob. This is a central theme in the promises given to patriarchs (starting with Abraham): "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you" (12,3; 22,18). There are several instances, where outsiders make this kind of statement proving to be blessed through Abraham's family. About Joseph it is said: "From the moment that he put him in charge of his household and all his possessions, the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; in fact, the LORD'S blessing was on everything he owned, both inside the house and out" (39,5).

Laban's answer is very tricky. Since he has been blessed, he is trying to hold Jacob with him as a source of richness. Jacob can not claim anything, or at the limit his two wives according to the wedding agreement. If he wants any other wage, he will have to stay and toil further.

29-30. "Jacob replied: "You know what work I did for you and how well your livestock fared under my care; ³⁰ the little you had before I came has grown into very much, since the LORD'S blessings came upon you in my company. Therefore I should now do something for my own household as well"

Jacob is using all his rhetorical skills in order to be allowed to get something for himself too. He is alluding to the promise made to him by Isaac: "These shall be as plentiful as the dust of the earth, and through them you shall spread out east and west, north and south. In you and your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing" (28,14) which now is fulfilled in growing of his uncle's property: "the little you had before I came has grown into very much". This spreading and growing has a particular connotation: it yields and manifests what is already contained and present in the "seed".

31-34. ""What should I pay you?" Laban asked. Jacob answered: "You do not have to pay me anything outright. I will again pasture and tend your flock, if you do this one thing for me: ³² go through your whole flock today and remove from it every dark animal among the sheep and every spotted or speckled one among the goats. Only such animals shall be my wages. ³³ In the future, whenever you check on these wages of mine, let my honesty testify against me: any animal in my possession that is not a speckled or spotted goat, or a dark sheep, got there by theft!"

The controversy continues and Jacob asks for himself the multicolored animals from the flocks. Laban agrees, considering this to be a good deal. Certainly he was expecting that Jacob would get much less than the typical 20% that ancient shepherds would normally receive as their wage. The meaning of Laban in Hebrew is "white" and it sounds similar to poplar tree (storax-tree). There is a high degree of irony used, since Jacob will deceive Laban with the very means expressed by his name.

35-36. "That same day Laban removed the streaked and spotted he-goats and all the speckled and spotted she-goats, all those with some white on them, as well as the fully dark-

colored sheep; these he left... in charge of his sons. ³⁶ Then he put a three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob continued to pasture the rest of Laban's flock.”

Here Laban is trying to prevent Jacob from cheating him. That's why he himself separates the multicolored animals and even puts a 3-day journey between the flocks. This precaution turns out to be advantageous for Jacob: he will carry out his plan and later leave without telling Laban (Gen 31). Three days distance occurs frequently in the desert-narratives to express great distance.

Patristic commentary: Jacob is a shepherd who proclaims the gospel and leads the flock illuminated by virtues. He was putting the shoots in water so that the sheep desire to know the mystery of the Trinity, represented by the three trees: the poplar stands for incense and evening sacrifice brought to God the Father. Almond represents Christ who is given the gift of the priesthood. The plane tree is a sign of the richness of spiritual fruit which comes from the Holy Spirit.

37-42. “Jacob, however, got some fresh shoots of poplar, almond and plane trees, and he made white stripes in them by peeling off the bark down to the white core of the shoots. ³⁸ The rods that he had thus peeled he then set upright in the watering troughs, so that they would be in front of the animals that drank from the troughs. When the animals were in heat as they came to drink, ³⁹ the goats mated by the rods, and so they brought forth streaked, speckled and spotted kids. ⁴⁰ The sheep, on the other hand, Jacob kept apart, and he set these animals to face the streaked or fully dark-colored animals of Laban. Thus he produced special flocks of his own, which he did not put with Laban's flock. ⁴¹ Moreover, whenever the hardier animals were in heat, Jacob would set the rods in the troughs in full view of these animals, so that they mated by the rods; ⁴² but with the weaker animals he would not put the rods there. So the feeble animals would go to Laban, but the sturdy ones to Jacob.”

With these verses, the second scene starts that describes how the deal has been carried out. The exact details of the procedures by which Jacob obtained multicolored and strong animals are rather obscure: the color of the small animals is determined by what their parents see during mating. The second principle seems clearer: stronger animals produce stronger kids.

Patristic commentary: Separation of the flocks is based on the difference between what is holy and what is profane. Those who belong to Christ are separated and refuse to be mixed with those who belong to the world. They are separated by their way of life and carry a visible sign of virtues (Cyril from Alexandria).

43. “Thus the man grew increasingly prosperous, and he came to own not only large flocks but also male and female servants and camels and asses”

Finally, the promise made to Jacob (28,14) is fulfilled and he becomes rich, like his grandfather Abraham: “it went very well with Abram, and he received flocks and herds, male and female slaves, male and female asses, and camels” (12,16). This was when Abraham was in exile in Egypt (for a short time only). In a similar way, Jacob is blessed and becomes rich man in exile. The same pattern will be repeated with Joseph – he will become rich in a foreign country (Egypt) as well.

31,1. Jacob learned that Laban's sons were saying, "Jacob has taken everything that belonged to our father, and he has accumulated all this wealth of his by using our father's property.

This verse, in form of personal comment, works as summary account, and at the same time it prepares the reader for the upcoming episode – separation and departure of Jacob envisioning the tension that will be intensified.

2. Jacob perceived, too, that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had previously been

Not only Laban's sons (v. 1), but also Laban changes his attitude towards Jacob, considering his success as shepherd. This is not surprising, since Laban has been characterized as a greedy man. Now Jacob really feels like a foreigner with his own family.

3. Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers, where you were born, and I will be with you"

Why is it that exactly now the Lord appears to him? God appeared to him when he was escaping from his brother Esau in mortal distress (Gn 28) on God's order. Also now he becomes more sensitive to God's voice. The command followed by a promise reminds one strongly of God's original command to Abraham: "go to the country... I will make you" (12,1-2). We can already notice the periodic repetition of promises, commands and renewed promises in the patriarchal stories. The Promised Land is for the first time called "land of the fathers".

Rabbinic commentary: I will be with you when you return home. But while you are here with unclean Laban, my presence can not dwell upon you!

4. So Jacob sent for Rachel and Leah to meet him where he was in the field with his flock

What starts in v. 4 is the second scene consisting of dialogue between Jacob and his two wives. Not being always consistent with the previous statements and events, the main objective of Jacob is to persuade his two wives to leave with him for the land of Canaan. This scene is located in the field to ensure privacy to their conversation.

5-13. There he said to them: "I have noticed that your father's attitude toward me is not as it was in the past; but the God of my father has been with me. ⁶ You well know what effort I put into serving your father; ⁷ yet your father cheated me and changed my wages time after time. God, however, did not let him do me any harm. ⁸ Whenever your father said, 'The speckled animals shall be your wages,' the entire flock would bear speckled young; whenever he said, 'The streaked animals shall be your wages,' the entire flock would bear streaked young. ⁹ Thus God reclaimed your father's livestock and gave it to me. ¹⁰ Once, in the breeding season, I had a dream in which I saw mating he-goats that were streaked, speckled and mottled. ¹¹ In the dream God's messenger called to me, 'Jacob!' 'Here!' I replied. ¹² Then he said: 'Note well. All the he-goats in the flock, as they mate, are streaked, speckled and mottled, for I have seen all the things that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³ I am the God who appeared to you in Bethel, where you anointed a memorial stone and made a vow to me. Up, then! Leave this land and return to the land of your birth.'"

The primary theme in this longer section is a triple comparison of how Laban has treated Jacob with how God has dealt with Jacob.

	Laban	God
5	Laban's changed attitude	God was with Jacob
6-7	Laban cheated and changed Jacob's wage	God prevented him harming Jacob
8-9	Laban's wages to Jacob	God gave herds to Jacob

This is confirmed in a dream/vision (10–13), reminding Jacob of the promise of God's fidelity (Gn 28) and encouraging him to return to his country.

5. The obvious statement about Laban's change of attitude implies another and more important one: God is on Jacob's side.

6-7. Jacob puts himself in the best possible light and God on his side as his protector against Laban's injustice.

8-9. Jacob describes everything from his point of view: doesn't mention the moment when Laban cheated him at the wedding, but the most recent case only. The account about the animal breeding is slightly different from Gen 30, where it was the narrator's viewpoint, whereas it is Jacob's version here (here he ascribes the breeding entirely to God). What God did with the animals is described as rescuing, or saving somebody from the danger of death ("Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau!" 32,12; 37,21-22). God has not simply transferred the animals from Laban to Jacob; he has done a favor to them, giving them a much better life. This is in line with the promise of blessing to those who will be with Abraham and his family. It is not through Jacob's activity and cleverness, but rather God who is the agent. Only in his dream does Jacob learn how God has given everything to him.

10-13. Jacob continues to present his own version, now speaking about his vision. The order to leave for Canaan is stressed through divine oracle at the end. The vision contains 3 substantial parts: vision – explanation (the angel's voice, effectively, is not much explanation, but rather a repetition of what Jacob has seen by himself) – command to leave. The sequence of actions reminds one of the vision Jacob had in Bethel on his way from Canaan to Haran.

Jacob hears the messenger's voice: "I have seen all the things that Laban has been doing to you". This is an important theological statement: when God sees his people oppressed, he intervenes to save them:

- "Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, "It means, The LORD saw my misery; now my husband will love me" (29,32);
- "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering" (Ex 3,9).

The strongest argument for Jacob's return is the promise made in Bethel: God has always protected Jacob, so now return to his homeland is obligatory.

14-16. Rachel and Leah answered him: "Have we still an heir's portion in our father's house? ¹⁵ Are we not regarded by him as outsiders? He not only sold us; he has even used up the money that he got for us! ¹⁶ All the wealth that God reclaimed from our father really belongs to us and our children. Therefore, do just as God has told you."

Leah and Rachel answer with insistency and reclaim a portion of their father's property. Normally, sons only inherited the family-property but daughters expected to receive a dowry when they got married. The reason for this is the perpetual character of family-property in Israel: the land belongs to the Lord and he gave portions to all the tribes. Now it has to remain within the tribes and within families, in order to keep justice. Only in exceptional cases could the property have been passed on daughters: **Num 27:8-11** "If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall let his heritage pass on to his daughter; ⁹ if he has no daughter, you shall give his heritage to his brothers; ¹⁰ if he has no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his father's brothers; ¹¹ if his father had no brothers, you shall give his heritage to his nearest relative in his clan, who shall then take possession of it. "

Though Leah and Rachel do complain about being cheated by their father on their dowry, they are even more upset about how their father has cheated on their husband. God has really rescued the money from their father and has given it to Jacob.

17-21. Jacob proceeded to put his children and wives on camels,¹⁸ and he drove off with all his livestock and all the property he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.¹⁹ Now Laban had gone away to shear his sheep, and Rachel had meanwhile appropriated her father's household idols.²⁰ Jacob had hoodwinked Laban the Aramean by not telling him of his intended flight.²¹ Thus he made his escape with all that he had. Once he was across the Euphrates, he headed for the highlands of Gilead.

The impression from this scene is that of haste. Everything, however, slows down in v. 18, using the classical terminology and pattern for the big moves of the patriarchs: Abram to Canaan (12,5), Jacob to Egypt (46,6), Israelites out of Egypt (Ex 15,14).

Since Laban was busy with shearing his sheep Jacob was able to escape. The household idols taken by Rachel are images of gods that protected a family and were worshiped, or they could have been images of ancestors (to be honored). The family piety was focused on them, but they could have been associated with divination (a practice prohibited in Israel). The reason for stealing the house-idols remains unclear. It might have been a means to ensure her fertility, or a simple amulet for their journey (like the medal of Saint Christopher).

Patristic commentary: Rachel took the idols, since she still followed her old practices. She did it without her husband's knowledge. (John Chrysostom)

Rabbinic commentary: Rachel stole the idols in order to protect her father from idolatry.

Laban, the cheater is now cheated – hoodwinked: his heart is stolen, which stands in parallel to stealing the idols. The rushed escape across the river and heading towards desert and highlands reminds one of the rushed leaving of Egypt across the Red Sea and heading towards the God's mountain.

Laban is called Aramean here. Arameans were the northern neighbors and archenemies of Israel in war-state for several centuries. It is irony against them as they were cheated so easily. Laban's wish to cheat Jacob is turned against him and he is cheated by his own daughter, whom he first had refused to give to Jacob. Now he is without daughter and without his idols.

Gilead is the hilly country beyond the river Jordan, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

Patristic commentary: Like Jacob, also Christ departed from the world with the wives – churches. He left with all his property and spoke to his companions: "Get up, let us go" (John 14,31). It is not in a material, but rather a spiritual way. Fullness of life is in the movement from thoughts of this world to the things approved by God (Cyril from Alexandria).

22-24. On the third day, word came to Laban that Jacob had fled.²³ Taking his kinsmen with him, he pursued him for seven days until he caught up with him in the hill country of Gilead.²⁴ But that night God appeared to Laban the Aramean in a dream and warned him, "Take care not to threaten Jacob with any harm!"

Laban, after getting message, persecutes Jacob and reaches him after 10 days in the country of Gilead. The distance from Euphrates to Gilead is some 300 miles, which is too much to be done with herds in 10 days. Either distance or time is an approximation here. In conformity with Jacob's previous statement, even here it is God who protects him, through a night vision to Laban. Despite that, the dialogue between the two men is very intense and fiery.

25-30. When Laban overtook Jacob, Jacob's tents were pitched in the highlands; Laban also pitched his tents there, on Mount Gilead.²⁶ "What do you mean," Laban demanded of Jacob, "by hoodwinking me and carrying off my daughters like war captives?"²⁷ Why did you dupe me by stealing away secretly? You should have told me, and I would have sent you off with merry singing to the sound of tambourines and harps.²⁸ You did not even allow me a parting kiss to my daughters and grandchildren! What you have now done is a senseless thing.²⁹ I have it in my

power to harm all of you; but last night the God of your father said to me, 'Take care not to threaten Jacob with any harm!' ³⁰ Granted that you had to leave because you were desperately homesick for your father's house, why did you steal my gods?"

The location of this scene is Mount Gilead. Laban complains that Jacob has not observed the formalities for leaving and has stolen from him. Laban speaks with hypocrisy and accuses Jacob of what he has been doing: carrying away Leah and Rachel as prisoners and holding them with the sword "carrying off my daughters like war captives". Jacob is accused of pursuing his own ends with the sword and now he also appears to be a fugitive! But it was Laban himself who did these things that he is accusing Jacob of: he detained Leah, Rachel and Jacob for six years and now is using violent means running after Jacob.

The question of Laban "what have you done" (26) is the same as the one asked by Jacob on the morning after his wedding, when he was cheated (29,25). The most serious accusation is made at the end – stealing of household gods.

31-32. "I was frightened," Jacob replied to Laban, "at the thought that you might take your daughters away from me by force. ³² But as for your gods, the one you find them with shall not remain alive! If, with my kinsmen looking on, you identify anything here as belonging to you, take it." Jacob, of course, had no idea that Rachel had stolen the idols.

Jacob admits the motives for his flight, but attacks Laban back accusing him of desiring to take away his daughters. This is the dramatical point of the story: Jacob with his statement calls death-penalty upon his beloved wife. (The Hammurabi code prescribes death-penalty for stealing temple property).

Rabbinic commentary: Jacob's curse was fulfilled when Rachel died prematurely at the birth of Benjamin.

33-35. Laban then went in and searched Jacob's tent and Leah's tent, as well as the tents of the two maidservants; but he did not find the idols. Leaving Leah's tent, he went into Rachel's. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the idols, put them inside a camel cushion, and seated herself upon them. When Laban had rummaged through the rest of her tent without finding them, ³⁵ Rachel said to her father, "Let not my lord feel offended that I cannot rise in your presence; a woman's period is upon me." So, despite his search, he did not find his idols.

The solution of the tension is delayed in this literary masterpiece: entering Rachel's tent is put last. We are told about Rachel's provision (securing the idols) only after Laban had entered her tent. There is much irony conveyed here, since the sacred objects and household-idols are saved only by menstruation (considered unclean) and serve as sanitary towels. Laban, the cheater turns out to be a great loser, since he did not find (repeated 3 times) anything. Laban's gods have to be searched for while Jacob's God, who leads his family, is always present to him and helps him.

36-42. Jacob, now enraged, upbraided Laban. "What crime or offense have I committed," he demanded, "that you should hound me so fiercely? ³⁷ Now that you have ransacked all my things, have you found a single object taken from your belongings? If so, produce it here before your kinsmen and mine, and let them decide between us two. ³⁸ "In the twenty years that I was under you, no ewe or she-goat of yours ever miscarried, and I have never feasted on a ram of your flock. ³⁹ I never brought you an animal torn by wild beasts; I made good the loss myself. You held me responsible for anything stolen by day or night. ⁴⁰ How often the scorching heat ravaged me by day, and the frost by night, while sleep fled from my eyes! ⁴¹ Of the twenty years that I have now spent in your household, I slaved fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock, while you changed my wages time after time. ⁴² If my ancestral God, the God of Abraham

and the Awesome One of Isaac, had not been on my side, you would now have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my plight and the fruits of my toil, and last night he gave judgment."

Jacob's answer contains the theological highlight and climax of the whole story: "you would now have sent me away empty-handed. But God ... gave judgment". When Jacob asks "What crime or offense have I committed" he is using the very same words used to describe the transgression against Joseph by his brothers: "You shall say to Joseph, Jacob begs you to forgive the criminal wrongdoing of your brothers, who treated you so cruelly" (50,17).

Jacob's defense speech turns everything and makes Laban guilty for making Jacob working 20 years. Jacob's right attitude is highlighted by his assuming responsibility for any losses among the animals. Jacob goes over the customs, since the traditional ancient Near East law didn't hold the shepherd responsible for losses caused by wild beast and/or theft: "If it has been killed by a wild beast, let him bring it as evidence, and he need not make restitution for the mangled animal" (Ex 22,12).

42. "If my ancestral God, the God of Abraham and the Awesome One of Isaac, had not been on my side, you would now have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my plight and the fruits of my toil, and last night he gave judgment"

This verse in particular contains several references to other moments of Israel's history and exodus-story in particular. "Sending away" is used in the exodus story for Israel leaving Egypt and Moses received promise, Israel would not leave empty-handed: "I will stretch out my hand, therefore, and smite Egypt by doing all kinds of wondrous deeds there. After that he will send you away.²¹ I will even make the Egyptians so well-disposed toward this people that, when you leave, you will not go empty-handed" (Ex 3,20-21). A slave was not supposed to be sent away empty-handed after six years of service: "When you do so, you shall not send him away empty-handed,¹⁴ but shall weight him down with gifts from your flock and threshing floor and wine press, in proportion to the blessing the LORD, your God, has bestowed on you" (Deut 15,13-14). Jacob is released from the slavery and the share he has by right is granted to him by God.

The words about God hearing his plight are used of the Egyptian oppression: "have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint" (Ex 3,7; Deut 26,7).

This kind of speech is not a simple summary but climax and theological statement: protection and wealth are result of God's power and help; the Lord is the one who makes people rich even when they are oppressed. A similar statement is made by Joseph as a climax of his story, allowing an overall understanding of his whole life: "God, therefore, sent me on ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance" (45,7); "Even though you meant harm to me, God meant it for good, to achieve his present end, the survival of many people" (50,20).

43-44. Laban replied to Jacob: "The women are mine, their children are mine, and the flocks are mine; everything you see belongs to me. But since these women are my daughters, I will now do something for them and for the children they have borne."⁴⁴ Come, then, we will make a pact, you and I; the LORD shall be a witness between us."

Laban has to recognize his defeat: four times he repeats that everything is his and he has to give it away to a foreigner. In addition, he asks for covenant. Whenever foreigners want to conclude covenant with the patriarchs, they admit the superiority of the later ones: "About that time Abimelech, accompanied by Phicol, the commander of his army, said to Abraham: "God is with you in everything you do."²³ Therefore, swear to me by God at this place that you will not deal falsely with me or with my progeny and posterity, but will act as loyally toward me and the land in which you stay as I have acted toward you."²⁴ To this Abraham replied, "I so swear" (22,21-24). It was a way of making sure that the patriarchs won't harm them in any way.

45-54. Then Jacob took a stone and set it up as a memorial stone. ⁴⁶ Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather some stones." So they got some stones and made a mound; and they had a meal there at the mound. ⁴⁷ Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob named it Galeed. ⁴⁸ "This mound," said Laban, "shall be a witness from now on between you and me." That is why it was named Galeed-- ⁴⁹ and also Mizpah, for he said: "May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are out of each other's sight. ⁵⁰ If you mistreat my daughters, or take other wives besides my daughters, remember that even though no one else is about, God will be witness between you and me." ⁵¹ Laban said further to Jacob: "Here is this mound, and here is the memorial stone that I have set up between you and me. ⁵² This mound shall be witness, and this memorial stone shall be witness, that, with hostile intent, neither may I pass beyond this mound into your territory, nor may you pass beyond it into mine. ⁵³ May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor (their ancestral deities) maintain justice between us!" Jacob took the oath by the Awesome One of Isaac. ⁵⁴ He then offered a sacrifice on the mountain and invited his kinsmen to share in the meal. When they had eaten, they passed the night on the mountain.

The exact meaning of the covenant-ceremony is difficult and not an object of our direct attention. What can be noted is the erection of a memorial stone – second out of three, marking turning points in Jacob's life (the other ones are after revelation at Bethel 28,18 and at Rachel's tomb 35,20).

The fact of gathering of more stones shows the importance of the event (and they might serve as testimonies). The meal might be a sacred meal concluding the covenant ceremony (anticipating v. 54): "Yet he did not smite these chosen Israelites. After gazing on God, they could still eat and drink" (Ex 24,11). Now even Laban admits God's superiority and calls him to watch over their behavior (v. 49).

50. There is an element of irony there when Laban asks Jacob not to take other women besides his daughters, since it was he himself who imposed bigamy upon Jacob. Laban wants to ensure not only safety and wellbeing of his daughters, but territorial integrity as well (52) and this is done recurring to "the gods of Abraham...". The covenant-ceremony is concluded with a sacred meal (54). The covenant finally makes peace between Laban and Jacob, and they leave with traditional kissing and blessing (54).

Meditatio

1. After 20 years of living abroad, Jacob still speaks of Canaan as "my homeland". Jacob fulfilled his father's order to find a wife among his relatives; he has a son from his beloved wife Rachel, God has protected him in Paddan-Aram from the cheating of his father-in-law and Jacob became rich. Now the time of return comes, not only because Jacob was born in Canaan, but because that country means the promises. Jacob can never forget where he came from and where he belongs; he can never forget the origin of his success.

As soon as people forget this, their whole life gets caught in marginal aspects of property, family, career and well-being. All of these things are positive and we should be thankful for them if we have them. Still, we should live with this perspective in mind: God is the source of our blessing and we should direct our way towards Him. Our final home is in heaven.

2. Returning to Canaan is more difficult than leaving was. Not only does Jacob have wives and children, but he has to deal with his father-in-law who can't afford to let go such a valuable helper. Laban knows "it is because of you that God has blessed me". Jacob can ask his wage, which is a nice way of saying, he has right on nothing: for 14 years of service he got his beloved wife Rachel. Knowing his father-in-law, he asks for nothing valuable. He makes only request to receive what seems not substantial at all: irregular animals. Strictly keeping to the

conditions of their agreements, Jacob ends up becoming rich and outwits his father-in-law. Hearing this story, one feels satisfaction for the fact that there is justice: “Sinners conceive iniquity... They open a hole and dig it deep, but fall into the pit they have dug” (Ps 7,15-16). This is a way to show how God deals with the wise “He catches the wise in their own ruses” (Job 5,13). He takes side of the disadvantaged and finally the divine justice prevails, even though it might take a long time, even 20 or more years. If people try to take justice in their hands it might end with tragedies and even greater injustice. Accepting an unjust share or being treated unjustly might turn out to be a way to happiness. It comes to being just with what we have; being good administrators! This general wisdom-statement is recorded: “A little with righteousness is better than abundance with wickedness” (Tob 12,8).

3. The delay in fulfillment of the promises might be at times frustrating for people. However, God is never frustrated. He repeats the same promise of land, descendants and property to the patriarchs. Jacob effectively flourishes in a foreign land, as Abraham before him (“it went very well with Abram, and he received flocks and herds, male and female slaves, male and female asses, and camels” 12,6) and his descendants after him in Egypt. Through the birth of his numerous sons the fulfillment of the promises is one more step closer. In order to have everything, Jacob wants to return to his homeland. Laban refuses to let go his servant Jacob, who became source of blessing for him (27), as pharaoh refused to let their slaves Israelites go (“making life bitter for them with hard work in mortar and brick and all kinds of field work-- the whole cruel fate of slaves” Ex 1,14; “Why, we have released Israel from our service!” Ex 14,5).

It was the plague sent from heaven that made the Pharaoh change his mind and let the Israelites go. It is God’s constant care for Jacob and holding his side that makes Laban change his mind and release Jacob. These statements are important for the life of the nation: people might be disappointed or discouraged seeing injustice, cheating or oppression happening around them. God is never frustrated with these things and finally brings justice.

All the obstacles we encounter on our way are not a reason to be discouraged. God is faithful to his word and promises. He is also faithful to ourselves more than we are. He might intervene through different events and delay his intervention but finally he will pursue his cause.

4. What had been planned by Jacob as a short stay for “a while (a few days) until your brother's fury subsides” (27,44) turned out to be twenty years of slave-work for his two wives and property. Twenty years is a long enough time to forget: routine or well-being makes one forget God easily.

In his speech with Leah and Rachel, trying to gain their loyalty before the planned departure, he makes references to God, who was standing on his side; he was repeatedly changing his fate and defending his cause.

This is also an aspect/lesson we can take and learn from his whole rhetoric section: The reasons for forgetting God might be different and numerous: general busyness and exhaustion, well-being and comfort or a slow sledding downhill in everything. Sometimes we say: “things work well even without God!”. Only people attentive to the course of their life will recognize this subtle line in the complexity of the world: God is there whether we think about him or not, whether we approach him or not, whether we want him or not. Even fewer people are courageous enough to speak about him openly. Attentive reflection and honesty impel us to profess God’s intervention in our favor in many areas and aspects of our life.

5. For peace, there must be two sides! It is hard to imagine a peaceful departure for Jacob: Laban would have always found a pretext for keeping him. That's why Jacob decides to escape. He can not avoid a confrontation with Laban, however, which takes place almost at the border with Canaan. In this controversy Laban recognizes the truth about Jacob's service and Jacob hints on God who has been protecting him. The true God has won. Finally they settle everything with a covenant as a sign of stability.

Sometimes a confrontation between people is unavoidable. Its aim should not be to destroy the opponent but to search for the truth – possibly together. Truth doesn't exist without God: the closer both sides are to him, the easier it becomes to reach agreement and covenant. It is true that we can not make other people be close to God directly. But what about me: am I making my best effort in this area?

Prayer

Almighty and ever living God! You answer all who call to you! You promised that you wouldn't turn away from the poor, widows, orphans and foreigners. In all our needs, mistreatments and injustice that we suffer, we come to you and ask your help for ourselves and for all who are in need. When people fail us, may you be our last (and first) resort. Help us to live blamelessly, keeping justice and striving for peace with others. Lead us to the final inheritance promised to us that you prepare for us in heaven.