

Veil of Piety

H/N 21/03/04 pm

Reading: Genesis 31:36-55, James 1

Study: Genesis 31:43-55

Psalms 27:1-4, 36:1-7, 51:6-10, 36:9-11

Laban departed and returned to his place (31:55). We come today to the end of Jacobs 20 years in Haran. 20 years at the mercy of the corrupt and deceitful Laban. By the powerful intervention of God, Laban's hand was stayed – he was warned in a dream not to harm Jacob. In fact he seems to have become a little fearful of Jacob, for now he wants to make a covenant with him.

We are reminded of the time in the life of his father Isaac when the Philistine king came to make a treaty or covenant with him (Genesis 26). Isaac had been expelled and was then harassed by the Philistines until he finally came to Beersheba. But Abimelech was fearful of a reprisal. Knowing that the Lord was with Isaac he wanted to make treaty of peace.

Laban accused Jacob of stealing his idols but then could not find them. Jacob became *angry and rebuked Laban*. He got stuck into Laban telling him how he had cheated him all these years and changed his wages ten times. He told him how he had worked hard and honestly all those years and got nothing in reward. Jacob declared that the God of Abraham and the God of my father had been with him, and reminded Laban that his God had rebuked him the previous night.

The Fear of Isaac is an unusual term found only in this chapter. It refers to God in terms of being the one whom Isaac feared or revered. The implication is that Laban also must fear this God, and indeed that all men must fear Him.

Laban did not answer the accusations of Jacob. They were true but he was not about to acknowledge that. He was not going to admit to any corruption. Ungodly man that he was, he comes back at Jacob with the hollow claim that *all that you see is mine*. He claimed ownership and authority over his daughters even after their marriage, ownership over his grandchildren, and over the off-coloured animals that were, by his agreement, Jacobs.

He was really stretching the point and he knew it. His claim was baseless. It was merely a diversion, avoiding the accusation of Jacob. Laban knew he was in a corner. He sighed *but what can I do this day*. God had rebuked him and now Jacob also. But there was no humility, no acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Just a cry of victimization, with the pitiful plea *what can I do this day*.

But there is always the way of piety. Take the moral high ground as we hear said these days. Laban said – *Now therefore come let us make a covenant you and I*. What a vastly different tone he now takes – remember the *...it is in my power to do you harm v.29*. Now he wants a treaty with Jacob. He wants to be the upright man making peace.

Jacob does not object. He in fact gets the stone to set up a pillar. He gets his relatives to gather

stones and make a heap over it. And he is the one who provides the meal to ratify the covenant. But who makes the terms of the covenant – Laban of course. And see what demands he makes on Jacob. But Jacob knew that the Lord was with him. He accepted this offer of peace – he was being a peacemaker.

There are two words that we find again and again in this passage – *pillar and heap/cairn*. They are important words as they have associations in the original Hebrew language. The word translated *pillar* differs from the word *Mizpah* by only one letter. Mizpah we are told means watch or watchtower (v.29).

Heap is a play on the word *Gilead*, which means *witness heap*. So both pillar and heap are in effect witness terms. We have here two witnesses, which one commentator suggests is in accord with the terms of OT covenant law (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jacob called this heap Galeed, the Hebrew term while Laban calls it by the equivalent Aramaic term Jegar Sahadutha.

What then was this covenant all about? What were the terms of the covenant? It was Laban who made the terms and they are intriguing to say the least.

1. *May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent/hidden one from another*. This so called Mizpah benediction was the first clause of this covenant made by Laban. And it was made because of his suspicion towards Jacob. It was certainly not in the context of blessing. There was no anticipation of a joyful meeting again. Rather Laban demands of Jacob 'don't you dare do anything to harm my daughters just because I can't see you'.

Laban demands Jacob take no other wives and that he treat the two he has well. What irony and indeed hypocrisy this is when he was the one to cause Jacob to be a bigamist in the first place! Laban called upon the Lord, YHWH as witness and to watch Jacob in this matter. This is the God of Jacob whom he does not know.

2. The heap was to be a border, a physical marker between the territory of Laban and that of Jacob. Maybe Laban feared that one day Jacob would become powerful and come after him seeking revenge. Jacob had no such desire – but such is the fear of those who live by own strength – they fear the strength of others when they should really fear God.

I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me for harm v.52. Laban invoked the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor to judge between them. This verb is in the plural so Laban is thinking of two deities here. Jacob, however, swears by the Fear of Isaac, by the one true God alone.

Jacob graciously accepted the terms of the covenant despite the bias. He was pleased that Laban vowed not to come beyond this heap to harm him. Laban had of course just come all this way with the intention of harming Jacob. Jacob who set up the heap now provided a sacrifice and meal to ratify the covenant in the traditional manner.

Jacob must have been glad and thankful to God for the assurance of this covenant. He would

have been glad to see the back of Laban the next day, yet probably sad for his wives and children that they would not see their father and grandfather again. God in his mercy brought about an amicable parting which Jacob thought impossible.

As we reflect on this passage we can observe features of the natural man portrayed in Laban. The natural man is loathe to admit his wrongdoing – just as much as he is to forgive another. Confession and forgiveness do not enter into any man-made religion – as is clearly evident from looking at the world around us. Can you imagine the difference there would be in this world if men were ready to say sorry and to forgive one another. It would make such a difference in the world of many people.

Laban was not ready to acknowledge his faults when Jacob clearly pointed them out to him – his cheating and mistreatment of Jacob. Even when God spoke to him he still did not humble himself and seek forgiveness. What does the Bible say about looking in a mirror and going away and forgetting *what kind of man you are (James 1)*? Laban would not accept what Jacob showed him. Rather he started to defend himself and to claim his rights. He claimed to own all that Jacob had including his wives and children.

This is the way of the natural man. He blatantly brings harm to others, but when he is exposed he plays the victim and starts claiming his rights. I have been wronged he claims when he should say I have done wrong and am sorry.

Laban goes a step further in defending himself. He turns to piety. *Come let us make a covenant you and I*. He wanted to portray himself as the man who upholds the law, the man who does things the right way – even as he goes on to reveal his hypocrisy in the covenant that he made with Jacob.

The veil of piety

How often we see this around us – in society and in the church. People who portray themselves as those who are upholding principles, but in fact are displaying hypocrisy. People who claim I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge and all faith but who in the words of Apostle Paul are nothing, nothing but clanging cymbals (I Corinthians 13).

I remember a pastor telling me of this fellow who came to church and afterwards was critical of the preaching, critical of the service, critical of the way people dressed. Nothing was being done in the right way according to him. I thought – Oh yes, must be a good stalwart of the church. But imagine my shock to be told that he only came to church twice a year! The veil of piety covering hypocrisy.

And another time this friend shared about a fellow who felt called to correct everyone and everything in the church. Not a service would go by but he was correcting someone in the church. One day apparently someone actually spoke to him about something he had said. Well that was it. He was never seen in the church again.

The veil of piety is often used to cover hypocrisy. Let us examine our own hearts and learn from Laban – learn what not to be like. Let us reflect on what we read in I Corinthians 13 lest we be clanging cymbals. Let us heed the words of James – *be doers of the word not hearers only*,

deceiving yourselves. He who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

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