

How Long did Jacob Wrestle with Laban—Part Two

What were the societies and cultures like in Mesopotamia during the time of the biblical patriarchs? Why was Jacob sent into Mesopotamia to choose a wife from among the daughters of Laban? And how many years did Jacob live with and work for Laban in Harran?

If we accept the story about Jacob's wives and the births of his children as it is presented in Scripture, we can certainly understand why some people would attempt to solve some of the inherent chronological problems and issues regarding the number of years Jacob lived with and worked for Laban in Harran.

Typically many people believe Jacob lived in Harran for 20 years based on the contractual agreements he made with Laban.

But could it be that Jacob was in Harran for more than 20 years?

We pick up the story with Jacob's meeting Rachel by the shepherd's well near Harran and his decision to live a month among his Mesopotamian relatives. Then at the end of the month Jacob entered into a seven-year agreement to work for his uncle Laban, perhaps in exchange for a dowry that would allow him to marry Rachel.

Then after this seven-year contractual agreement was fulfilled, Laban deceived Jacob into marrying the eldest daughter Leah first, which angered Jacob. To settle the problem, Laban agreed to give him Rachel after a week if Jacob would again enter into

another seven-year contractual agreement to work for Laban.

Now according to the biblical account Leah began to have children starting with her firstborn Reuben, who was born perhaps as early as the latter part of Jacob's eighth year in Harran. Then Leah had three more sons, with the second son Simeon being born in about Jacob's 10th year of contractual service. Then Levi would likely have been born about the 12th year in Harran, and finally Judah would have been born near the end of the 14 contractual years that Jacob worked for Laban. (The birth years are reasonably estimated, but the sequence of the births are according to Scripture. It is not likely that a child was born every consecutive year for Leah.)

Then we read that Leah stopped having children, or as it reads in the Authorized Version, Leah "left bearing" (Gen. 29:35).

An assumption that is commonly made regarding this statement is that Leah was only taking a short break from child bearing. But this is not the sense of Scripture because the statement means that she actually ceased having children, with the intent or circumstance to remain that way.

Simply the statement that Leah "left bearing" implies she had reason to perceive that she wouldn't or couldn't have more children.

Now if we follow the story closely we see that Leah's circumstance—to cease having children—was followed by the account of

Rachel allowing her handmaid Bilhah to have children in her stead by her husband Jacob. It may have been that Leah's situation prompted Rachel to make this kind of decision, or perhaps Rachel had determined to do this earlier while Leah was still able to bear her first four children, but we cannot know for certain.

Nevertheless Rachel's handmaid Bilhah began to have children—first Dan and then Naphtali.

Perhaps there may have been some overlap with the births of Bilhah's children and the births of Leah's children, but it is not likely there was any overlap with the births of those children born to Leah's handmaid Zilpah and the birth of Leah's first four children. The reason is because according to Scripture Leah had four children, then Bilhah had two children, and after that Zilpah had two children in Leah's stead.

Therefore, given the biblical context, Zilpah's children would have been born after Leah ceased having children. And Scripture states that: “when Leah saw that she had left [ceased] bearing, she took Zilpah her maid, and gave her Jacob to wife” (Gen. 30:9).

Consequently the time when Leah was unable to have children was not marked by the births of the children born to Rachel's handmaid Bilhah, but rather to the births of those born to Leah's handmaid Zilpah according to the record of Scripture. And so Leah may have had children during the time that Bilhah gave birth to Dan and Naphtali, but not during the time Zilpah was giving birth to both Gad and Asher.

This would account for a period of a few years when Leah was not bearing children.

But let's continue.

Scripture tells us it was after Zilpah had given birth to two sons that Leah was again able to have children. And after the birth of her fifth son, Leah said, “God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband: and she called his name Issachar” (Gen. 30:18).

Here Leah claims that the birth of Issachar was considered to be like a wage or reward because she had given Zilpah to Jacob and there were children born by Zilpah. So the result of children being born by Zilpah was perceived as having gained favor from God, so Leah said that “God hath given me my hire.”

The sense then is that Leah felt rewarded by God because her handmaid Zilpah had children with Jacob, confirming that some years had passed after the birth of Judah before Leah began to bear children again. This conclusion has support in that Leah was apparently asking God for more children after she “left bearing,” and Scripture states that: “God hearkened unto Leah, and she conceived, and bare Jacob the fifth son” (Gen. 30:17).

After this Leah had her sixth son Zebulun, and she likened all of her children to a dowry, which was a bride's family's gift to the bridegroom. And it was sometime after this that Leah had a daughter named Dinah. (Scripture notes that Issachar and Zebulun were numbered fifth and sixth in respect to their births, which did not account for the interval births of Zilpah's children. This

ordinal numbering of her sons presumes a resumption of bearing children after a period of time because Leah had indeed “left bearing” for some years.)

Then after all this Rachel finally gave birth to her first son Joseph according to the apparent chronology of the story, which occurred six years before Jacob returned to Canaan. This means that we need to establish a reasonable time period to account for all the known births of Jacob’s sons in Harran, respective to Jacob’s years of contractual service for Laban.

Now we know that children were born to Jacob starting at the earliest in his eighth year in Harran. If we are assuming a twenty-year period of time in Harran then we have at most a period of thirteen years for nearly all the sons to be born.

However, Scripture appears to establish the time for the births to be between two notable events, leaving only a seven-year period of time to reckon the births of Jacob’s sons, excluding Benjamin’s birth and assuming 20 years in Harran.

The first event is the marriage of Jacob to Leah and Rachel following seven years in Harran, and the second event is the birth of Joseph, which was six years before Jacob returned to Canaan. And Scripture confirms that “when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country. Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served thee, and let me go: for thou knowest my service which I have done thee” (Gen. 30:25-26).

Importantly, then, it was after the birth of Joseph when Jacob asked to leave with his wives and his children, and Jacob mentions that he had served for his wives and his children, which would have certainly included those children born to both Leah and Rachel and those children born to the two handmaids. With the conclusion being that Jacob was speaking of all of his children who were born by this time, and this time—when Jacob accounted for all of his children—was marked by the beginning of a third contractual agreement with Laban.

“And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes, tarry: for I have learned by experience that the Lord hath blessed me for thy sake. And he said, Appoint me thy wages, and I will give it. And he [Jacob] said unto him, Thou knowest how I have served thee, and how thy cattle was with me. For it was little which thou hadst before I came, and it is now increased unto a multitude; and the Lord hath blessed thee since my coming: and now when shall I provide for mine own house also?” (Gen. 30:27-30.)

Here we find that after Joseph’s birth Jacob claimed to have worked for Laban’s prosperity and that he had not provided for the future of his “own house,” and so now he would be paid with livestock of his own, which marked the ending time for the births of Jacob’s children in Harran, and the beginning of a six-year contractual agreement to work for himself and for Laban. (Benjamin was born during the journey back to Canaan.)

Now then if we are still assuming a twenty-year period of time to account for Jacob’s years in Harran, then the births of Jacob’s

children fell within a seven-year period, between the events of his marriages and the birth of Joseph when Jacob first attempted to leave for Canaan.

This is arguably not possible.

And there are two reasons in particular.

First, even if we overlap the births of Bilhah's children with the births of Leah's first four children, we still cannot reasonably account for Leah's and Zilpah's nine children to be born within a contractual seven-year period of time. Especially with the understanding that Leah had "left bearing," and was unable to have children until the births of her fifth and sixth sons—Issachar and Zebulun—which was acceptably after Zilpah had given birth to her two children.

But let's look at a second reason.

We begin by examining what seems like an insignificant part of the story when Reuben had found mandrakes during the summer wheat harvest and had brought them to his mother Leah.

Now we know that Jacob and Laban did not make an agreement concerning the livestock until after Joseph was born, at a time when Jacob was first preparing to leave Harran. We also know Reuben was born after the completion of the first seven-year contract with Laban, and possibly during the first year of the second seven-year contract—Jacob's eighth year in Harran. And so Reuben was born at the earliest in the eighth year of Jacob's time in Harran, and Joseph was born at the latest in the 14th year of Jacob's time in Harran—assuming a twenty-year period of time in Harran.

This presents an interesting situation because if we assume a twenty-year period of time in Harran, then we would have to conclude that Reuben, the oldest son, would have been at most about six years old when Joseph was born. And Reuben would have only been at most five years old in the time of the wheat harvest before or possibly during the time when Rachel was pregnant with Joseph. (It is likely that Rachel had not conceived before the event regarding the mandrakes.)

Therefore it is incongruous to consider that Reuben was even old enough to gather mandrakes at age four or age five, and it is not conceivable really that Leah and Rachel would have quarreled over something a four-year old child could find (Gen. 30:14). (The mandrakes probably had nothing to do with Joseph's conception, but the issue is the relationship of what Reuben did in respect to his age and the age of his younger half-brother Joseph.)

So it is not possible to account for nearly all the births of Jacob's children in an assumed twenty-year period of time in Harran.

So let's ask this.

How many years then was Jacob in Harran?

The result of Jacob spending another six contractual years with Laban caused him to prosper in the growth of his livestock. But it also bankrupted Laban's family even though Laban schemed by changing the stipulations of the agreement 10 times. Thus Jacob fell out of favor with his Mesopotamian relatives and decided to finally leave Harran, and he with his family began their journey back to Canaan (Gen. 31:1-2).

And understandably then—under these circumstances—Jacob feared that Laban would try to take his daughters back, so he decided to leave without telling Laban.

“Then Jacob rose up, and set his sons and his wives upon camels; And he carried away all his cattle, and all his goods which he had gotten, the cattle of his getting, which he had gotten in Padanaram, for to go to Isaac his father in the land of Canaan” (Gen. 31:17-18).

Then upon learning of Jacob’s departure, Laban pursued after him, in part to try and stop Jacob from leaving and in part to find the idols of his household that had been stolen by Rachel. (These idols were possibly teraphim or terra-cotta household gods given to the next legal heir of the family’s estate, which may have had some consequences in regard to the birth-right promises given to Jacob.)

This is when a fourth agreement was made between Jacob and Laban in which both agreed not to cross a certain boundary marker to do harm to the other’s family. And as a background to this agreement, which was also a rebuke to Laban over the idols, Jacob explains the number of years he lived with and worked for Laban in Harran.


So Jacob said to Laban, “This twenty years have I been with thee” (Gen. 31:38).

This statement is understood to represent one set of twenty years that Jacob served and worked for Laban without any agreement or contract. This was a twenty-year period of time when Jacob cared for Laban’s livestock and took nothing from Laban, even accepting the loss himself on behalf of Laban.

These specific 20 years of service began after the two successive seven-year contractual agreements that Jacob fulfilled for his wives.

Then the second set of 20 years, which included the years of contractual agreements for his wives, was carefully explained by Jacob when he said, “Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times” (Gen. 31:41).

In these two disclaimers to Laban, Jacob was saying that during a separate 20 years of contractual service in Laban’s “house” he served under three separate contracts, and he also lived in Harran and tended to Laban’s estate for an additional 20 years, during which time most of his children were born.

This leads us to conclude that Jacob lived with and worked for Laban for a total of 40 years in which he wrestled with Laban’s trickery—suffering personal loss and hardship in establishing his own wealth and posterity for his children—until he prevailed before returning to his father’s house in Canaan.  **(End of two-part series.)**