

БОГОСЛОВСЬКІ НАУКИ

УДК 7:046.26.

Doi: 10.55315/graphe.1.2021.6-11

Тематична рубрика: теологія.

**JACOB AT THE HOUSEHOLD OF LABAN:
A SLAVE OR A FREE MAN?****Felix Poniatowski****PhD, assistant professor***Adventist University of Africa**Nairobi, Kenya*

E-Mail: poniatowski@ugi.edu.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6541-105X>

Abstract. There are different opinions among the scholars regarding the interpretation of Jacob–Laban relationship. While some believe that Jacob was treated by Laban as a son, others think that Laban diminished Jacob’s status to the position of a hired worker. This article goes even further and seeks to demonstrate that Laban’s attitude towards Jacob should be understood as that of a master towards his slave. Following arguments might be brought forward to support this interpretation: 1) In the Ancient near east very often the border between a slave and a semi-slave person was not clear; 2) Jacob came to Laban as a free man he voluntarily submitted himself to the patronage of the latter and became his debt slave; 3) even after Jacob had finished fourteen years of labor for Rachel and Leah Laban still treated him as a slave. It is clearly seen when Laban claimed the right to not allow Leah and Rachel to go with Jacob (Gen 31:43). Such a claim can be understood in the light of the law about a man-slave who was given a wife by his master, which is found in both biblical laws (Exod 21:2-4) and ancient Babylonian laws (Ur-Namma). So, until the end of Jacob’s staying at Laban’s household he was treated as a slave by his father-in-law. Such harsh attitude of Laban towards his daughters and son-in-law might be explained by Laban’s character who is portrayed in the book of Genesis as a greedy person. Some details of the narrative prove that Laban wanted to cheat on Jacob from the very moment when Jacob expressed a desire to marry Rachel. Since in the ancient times the status of a daughter was not very different from a slave girl one can understand why Laban treats his daughters and son-in-law this way. This interpretation of Jacob-Laban relationship is confirmed by parallels with ancient customs, traditions, and laws.

Key words: Genesis, Jacob and Laban, slave.

**ЯКІВ У БУДИНКУ ЛАВАНА:
РАБ АБО ВІЛЬНА ЛЮДИНА?****Фелікс Понятовський****доктор філософії, доцент***Адвентистський університет Африки**Найробі, Кенія*

E-Mail: poniatowski@ugi.edu.ua

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6541-105X>

Анотація. Вчені мають різні думки щодо того, як слід розуміти відносини, що виникли між Яковом і Лаваном. Деякі вважають, що Лаван ставився до Якова, як до сина, а інші переконані, що Лаван знизив

статус Якова до становища найманого працівника. Ця стаття намагається продемонструвати, що ставлення Лавана до Якова слід розуміти, як ставлення пана до свого раба. На підтримку цієї інтерпретації можна навести кілька аргументів: на Стародавньому Близькому Сході дуже часто межа між рабом і напіввільною людиною була досить розмитою; Яків прийшов до Лавана вільною людиною, але добровільно підкорився йому і став його борговим рабом, коли запропонував відпрацювати за дружину; навіть після того, як Яків закінчив чотирнадцять років роботи за своїх дружин Рахіль та Лію, Лаван все ще ставиться до нього, як до раба. Це стає зрозумілим, коли Лаван заявив про своє право не дозволяти Лії й Рахілі йти з Яковом (Бут. 31:43). Таке твердження можна тлумачити у світлі закону про чоловіка-раба, якому господар дав дружину. Подібні закони містяться як в біблійних джерелах (Вихід 21:2-4), так і в стародавніх вавилонських кодексах (Ур-Намму). Отже, до кінця перебування Якова в будинку Лавана його тесть ставиться до нього, як до раба. Таке різке ставлення Лавана до своїх дочок та зятя можна пояснити жадібністю Лавана. Про це ми дізнаємося із книги Буття. Деякі деталі розповіді доводять, що Лаван хотів обдурити Якова з того самого моменту, коли Яків висловив бажання одружитися з Рахіллю. Оскільки в давні часи статус дочки не сильно відрізнявся від статусу рабині, можна зрозуміти, чому Лаван так ставиться до своїх дочок і зятя. Таке тлумачення відносин Якова та Лавана підтверджується паралелями зі стародавніми звичаями, традиціями й законами.

Ключові слова: Буття, Яків і Лаван, раб.

Introduction. In our days it goes without saying that the slavery in Ancient Near East was completely different from that of the American South or even Ancient Rome. Although much researches have been done on this matter since the 1940s the true picture of the social status of the slaves remains obscure. As Nathan Andersen pointed out, «Though a sketchpad of the Israelite slave system is available in Old Testament text, it is still difficult to ascertain exactly how biblical masters and slaves related to one another on a daily basis» [1, p. 79]. The purpose of this article is not so much to clarify the issue of the ancient slavery but to consider one case, namely the case of Jacob's service to Laban.

There are a lot of debates revolving around the proper interpretation of Jacob – Laban relationship. Thus, Cyrus Gordon suggested that Laban had welcomed Jacob into his family and adopted him as a son [7, p. 6]. Gordon made this assumption based on the parallels with the customs of adoption found among the Nuzi tablets. He tried to reconstruct the situation in the following way: Laban did not have sons when Jacob arrived, therefore, by giving to Jacob Leah and Rachel as wives Laban adopted Jacob to be an heir of all his property. However, later, when the sons were born to him, Laban changed his mind. If it were the case, according to the Nuzi customs, Jacob should've retained all the rights of an adopted son, but he could not claim the birthright anymore [19, p. 32]. However, the narrative of the book of Genesis does not imply that Jacob is treated in Laban's family as an adopted son; it is more likely that he is a hired worker.

Another understanding of Jacob – Laban relationship was suggested by David Daube and Reuven Yaron [4, p. 60-62]. They argued, contrary to Gordon, that Laban did not welcome Jacob to his family as a relative but diminished Jacob's status to the position of a hired worker. The main point is the interpretation of the sentence «Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing?» (Gen 29:15). According to Daube and Yaron, the proper rendering of Laban's question implies not an affirmation of a kinship relationship but its negation. In other words, Laban is asking a rhetorical question that implies a negative answer and could be understood like, «You are not my brother; therefore, you should not work for me for nothing». So, Daube and Yaron concluded, «When Jacob was offered a reward for his work, it was degradation, not promotion: having lost his status in the family, he became a hireling» [4, p. 62].

Analysis of scientific sources and literature. It looks like since the publication of the article by Daube and Yaron scholars are divided on how to interpret Jacob–Laban relationship. Many commentators agree that by suggesting a wage for Jacob's work Laban discarded family ties [2, p. 783; 23, p. 234; 22, p. 404]. However, some believe that Laban's question «Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?» (Gen 29:15) could be considered as a confirmation of the relative relationship between the two [9, p. 258]. However, all scholars agree that Laban intended to make some profit from the difficult situation of his nephew. In this article, I want to go even further and demonstrate that Laban's attitude towards Jacob can be classified as that of a master to his slave. Before analyzing the arguments, several general observations should be made.

Slavery in the ANE. While analyzing the structure of the ANE society, scholars usually single out three

classes: 1) free people; 2) semi-free people; and 3) slaves [3, p. 49; 12, p. 244]; or sometimes only two: 1) the master class; 2) everybody else [6, p. 92]. The reduction of the structure of the society to only two classes is explained by the dependent position of the semi-free class and by the blurred borders between the second and the third classes [11, p. 152]. We can also assume that in an ancient society most of the people were dependent on somebody else. It is evident from the fact that the term «slave» was not negative in ancient times. It applied to «any subordinate in the social ladder» [24, p.1634; 25, p. 448]. Even the kings might call themselves «slaves» when they referred to their suzerain. Therefore, it was not shameful to become a slave.

The semi-free class was formed by the formerly free people who lost the means of production due to many different reasons and were forced to give themselves or their relatives into debt-slavery. As Isaac Mendelsohn points out, this was the main source of slaves in the Ancient Near East [14, p. 79]. It looks like this class was quite big and the ancient kings quite often even issued special decrees to set the debt-slaves free [24, p.1633] and sometimes even paid their creditors [24, p.1652]. However, it is not clear why they did this. Maybe because the great number of the debt-slaves negatively affected the economy of the country or, what is more probable, in such a way the kings wanted to get the glory of a liberator and win the favor of poor people.

It is also important to note that a clear distinction existed between the debt slaves and chattel slaves. The latter did not have a right for redemption and usually remained slaves for a lifetime. Furthermore, the chattel slaves were treated differently in the law codices [3, p. 53]. The debt slaves were not supposed to be permanent slaves [12, p.245]. Different societies had different restrictions regarding how long a debt slave should serve to his master to cover his or her financial obligations. Thus, the Hammurabi Code prescribed that a debt slave should work three years and be released in the fourth year (§ 117). However, scholars doubt that such an article of the law was being regularly fulfilled. As R. Westbrook pointed out, it was rather «ideal standards than standard practice» [24, p. 1657]. In the Mosaic Law six years of work were prescribed for the debt-slaves (Exod 21:2), however, as it is clear from Jeremiah 34, this law was not always kept. We may assume that it could be very often the case when a former owner did not want to release a slave. Even in the case when slaves were set free some dependency on the former master still existed. As Patterson observed, «Almost universally the former master has established a strong patron-client bond with his freedman» [16, p. 240].

Jacob at the service to Laban. Upon arrival at Laban's house, Jacob fell in love with Rachel and wanted to marry her (Gen 29:18). However, as a bridegroom, he had to pay the so-called *terhatu* or *mohar* (a bride price). Since Jacob could not pay it, the only chance for him to marry was to become Laban's worker and to pay Laban with his service. In this case, Jacob's status in Laban's family might be defined as a debt slave or a pledge. As R. Westbrook describes it, «Debtors could give themselves or persons under their authority to creditors by way of pledge. The resulting conditions were analogous to those of slavery: the pledge lost his freedom and was required to serve the pledgee, who exploited the pledge's labor. Nonetheless, the relationship between debtor and creditor remained one of contract, not property» [24, p. 1636].

There is another striking detail in the Genesis narrative – Laban very quickly agreed upon Jacob's suggestion to work seven years for Rachel. And, when the time of the wedding came, Laban used the opportunity to give Leah to Jacob as well. So, there is an impression that Laban wanted to get rid of his daughters and was happy to give them to anyone who agreed to marry them. His words spoken to Jacob seem to be a clue to understand his intention: «It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man» (Gen 29:19, ESV). Why is it better for Laban to give his daughter to a poor stranger Jacob who was not much different from a slave than to give her to any other man? The answer to this question can be found in Laban's character. The author of the book of Genesis emphasizes Laban's special interest in wealth. When he saw jewelry presented by Eleazar to his sister Rebecca, he began to curry favor with the servant of Abraham, «As soon as he saw the ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms, and heard the words of Rebekah his sister, 'Thus the man spoke to me,' he went to the man. ... He said, 'Come in, O blessed of the LORD. Why do you stand outside? For I have prepared the house and a place for the camels'» (Gen 24:30-31). Taking into consideration Laban's love for money we can assume that he saw some benefit in giving his daughters to Jacob than to anybody else.

According to the ancient traditions, the bridegroom was supposed to pay the bride price, *terhatu*, and the father of the girl had to provide a dowry. The amount of the bride price during the Old Babylonian period varied from 1 to 40 shekels [20, p. 135] and was approximately equal to the price of a slave girl [21, p. 117]. Later, in the time of the

Neo-Babylonian Empire, the tradition to pay the bride price vanished and only the dowry remained as a marriage gift [20, p. 132]. However, in the period of the biblical patriarchs, the bride price was one of the highest, up to thirty shekels [21, p. 135]. Most probably, Jacob had to pay Laban about sixty shekels for both daughters. However, Laban had to provide the dowry for Leah and Rachel. The dowry might consist of many different items like silver, jewelry, household goods, slaves, etc. [15, p. 28; 21, p. 139] and usually much exceeded the bride price [20, p. 154]. Therefore, Laban had to give Jacob much more than Jacob's *terhatu*. If Laban gave his daughters to somebody else, most probably, he would not be able to avoid giving the full dowry, however, he could cheat on Jacob and keep the dowry with himself. The following narrative reveals that most probably Laban's daughters have not received from their father what they expected to get. «Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, 'Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money'» (Gen 31:14-15). If this consideration is true then Laban's words, «It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man» (Gen 29:19) might be understood as a hint indicating that Laban from the very beginning wanted to cheat on Jacob.

Having finished fourteen years of work for his wives Jacob should not be considered a slave anymore. He must get a status of a hired worker, a shepherd. As J. Finkelstein points out, the story about Jacob and Laban fits very well the ancient owners-shepherds' milieu [5, p. 32] and Laban's treatment of Jacob might be explained through the lens of the existing at that time legal traditions.

There is a big number of the survived Old Babylonian contracts between the cattle-owners and the shepherds, which shed a lot of light on the biblical text [5; 8; 17]. Usually, according to the survived contracts, shepherd's payment depended upon the increase in livestock. A certain ratio of the flock increase was anticipated and shepherds could get all the lambs beyond the stipulated number. For example, at Larsa the increase of 80 lambs per 100 ewes was expected [17, p. 5]. It means the shepherd could get all that exceeds this percentage. However, except for the increase of the flock population, shepherds might have had other liabilities like returning wool or dairy products [13, p.497]. Furthermore, the shepherds were responsible for any loss or decrease in the flock population and were obliged to repay for it [10, p. 66]. In case if the loss was caused by reasons beyond the control of a shepherd, he was exempted from repayment but was obliged to provide proof of it, like the skin of an animal killed by a lion [17, p. 6]. If one takes into consideration all the liabilities of the shepherds, it becomes clear that it was a risky business. As Andrew Mein points out, the big number of records when the shepherds were not able to meet the stipulations of the contract suggests that «the owners may have had a keen eye for a feasible return» [13, p. 498] and did not allow shepherds to get rich easily. Although the stipulations of the contract were exactly prescribed there was enough room for maneuvering for the owner.

Jacob complained that Laban changed his wages ten times (Gen 31:41). These words might be an indicator that Laban changed the conditions of the contract to diminish Jacob's wage as much as possible. The case of spotted and white sheep is a very good illustration of how Laban treated Jacob (Gen 30:31-43). When Laban asked what wage Jacob would like to get, Jacob suggested Laban give him all the spotted cattle as payment. J. Finkelstein observed that usually the sheep were white and the goats were black and the percentage of the dark-colored animals in the flock was very insignificant [5, p. 33]. Under such conditions Jacob was not supposed to get a big remuneration. However, Laban wanted to be sure that Jacob would get almost nothing and separated all the spotted and pecked animals and entrusted them to his sons (Gen 30:35-36). What is surprising – Laban even did not disguise his intention to give Jacob nothing.

A dialogue between Laban and Jacob on the road to Canaan illuminates Laban's attitude toward his son-in-law. «Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, the daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine» (Gen 31:43, ESV).

Laban openly asserts that Jacob owns nothing and all the property belongs only to him. However, there is one more very peculiar detail in this statement. Laban even claims that the daughters and their children do not belong to Jacob. Such a statement could be very surprising but there is nothing unusual in it if it is considered in the context of the owner-slave relationship. According to the Covenant Code, a slave who fulfilled six years of work and is freed cannot take his wife with him if she was given to him by a master.

«When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go out free, for nothing. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives

him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out alone» (Exod 21:2–4, ESV).

A similar law could be found among the Laws of Ur-Namma, which means that it was common in ancient times. «If a male slave marries a female slave, his beloved, and that male slave (later) is given his freedom, she/he will not leave (or: be evicted from?) the house» [18, p. 17].

In the light of this law, it becomes evident that Laban treats Jacob as a slave. Even though 14 years of Jacob's labor for the wives are over, Laban does not recognize the free status of his son-in-law. For him Jacob is still a slave and if he wants to go from the master he must go alone.

One more detail should be mentioned. The period of Jacob staying at Laban's house was twenty years (Gen 31:38, 41). Jacob himself explained this period as consisting of two parts—serving for the wives and the flock. «These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times» (Gen 31:41, ESV). However, the period of six years of labor fits very well the law of Exod 21:2 and can be considered as a term of debt-slavery service. It is striking that the Lord urged Jacob to return to Canaan exactly after his six years of work at Laban's house. In this case, the twenty years might be presented as 14 years serving for the wives and 6 years for himself. Most probably, Laban intended to keep Jacob in his household as a lifetime slave and only God's intervention changed his intentions.

Conclusions. Laban's treatment of Jacob might be better understood in the light of the slave-master relationship. Laban's speech (Gen 31:41) reveals that Laban perceived Jacob as a slave. This notion can explain Laban's undisguised unwillingness to pay Jacob. The story of Jacob sheds a lot of light on the perception of slavery in ancient times. First of all, the border between a slave and a poor man without means of production was pretty much blurred. Most probably, Jacob did not perceive himself as a slave after he had finished fourteen years of service for his wives but Laban treated him exactly as a slave. Also, the status of women even born to a free man (like Laban's daughters) did not differ very much from that of slaves. Since the daughters had to leave the family when married and even took with themselves a part of the property as a dowry they might be considered as a source of expenses. Also, this story reveals how difficult it was to change the status from a slave to a fully free man. Even after being set free, a person might remain dependent on his former master and eventually become a slave again.

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