

Spotted and Spotless, Light and Dark

Mike Southern
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A lot of ancient religious practices — and more modern ones than we'd like to admit — are just attempts to manipulate God and nature. People convince themselves that if they just push the right buttons, God HAS to do what they want. And most of the time they just make themselves look silly.

Many scholars believe that today's story is an example of that, but Jacob certainly seems to know that God is doing something of His own choice, not because of anything Jacob has done. And if that's true... well, let's just say that God has a sense of humor when it comes to watching after the people who trust Him.

This story — part one of two — comes from Genesis 30:25-43.

After Jacob's parents sent him away to his uncle's house—
because his brother Esau would have killed him
for stealing his birthright—
God promised He would take care of Jacob
and bring him back home safely.

So Jacob went to his uncle Laban's house
as his parents wanted,
and married one of his uncle's daughters
as his parents wanted.

But Laban didn't treat Jacob fairly.
He had two daughters, and he used the customs of his people
to trick Jacob into marrying BOTH of them!
The trick resulted in Jacob tending sheep for his uncle for 14 years,
making Laban rich while Jacob got nothing.

As you can probably guess, God wasn't very happy with Laban!
So He decided to teach Laban a lesson
while fulfilling his promises to Jacob.

When the 14 years were finished,
Jacob told Laban that he was going to take his wives and children
and go back to his parents.
Laban, unwilling to lose the man who had made him rich,
begged him to stay.
“Tell me what you want me to pay you,” he told Jacob,
“and I'll give it to you. Just stay here and work for me.”

So Jacob agreed to stay...

Provided that his uncle would agree to this strange request:

Instead of wages, Jacob wanted *lambs*. And not just any lambs...

He wanted the *ugly* ones, the ones most shepherds *wouldn't* want.

When new lambs were born,

he didn't want the ones with pure white wool. *NO!*

He wanted the ones with *dark* wool—

the ones that were spotted,

the ones that were speckled,

the ones with no white at all!

And the request sounded so silly that Laban was happy to agree!

But Jacob had what sounded like a crazy plan.

He took a bunch of sticks with dark bark on them

and whittled them down so the white wood beneath showed through—

white spots on dark sticks!

Then, when the strongest sheep came to the watering troughs and began to mate,

they saw those speckled sticks...

and when the lambs were born, they were dark with white spots!

Jacob added those lambs to his own flocks.

But when the weaker sheep mated, Jacob took the sticks away

and those lambs were born pure white

so they stayed in Laban's flock.

By doing this, Jacob's flocks grew larger and stronger

while Laban's grew larger but weaker.

In those times, a man's wealth was measured by the size and quality of his flocks.

Before long, Jacob became very rich!

But when one man gets rich off of another,

problems are sure to arise...

and it was no different for Jacob.

That, however, is another story...