

Ask Away – January 23

1) What did Laban mean when he said, “I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you”? (Gen 30:27)

The word “divination” (*nachash*) means “to divine, to practice divination, to observe signs.”¹ It refers to the search for hidden knowledge by supernatural means, and was condemned by God in the Mosaic Law (Lev 19:26; Deut 18:10). Its practice was one of the reasons for Israel’s exile from the land (2 Kings 17:17). While divination was usually practiced to foretell future events, it was also mentioned as a method to discover knowledge of the past or present (cf. Gen 44:5, 15).

Why was Laban trying to figure out the source of his newfound prosperity? Over the fourteen years Jacob worked for Rachel and Leah, Laban experienced an exceptional increase in possessions and wealth (cf. Gen 31:1, 16). That Laban did not attribute the success to his own gods (Gen 31:30) shows how miraculous the increase was. In this way, God made sure that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was given the glory.

But did God actually speak to Laban through divination? We can’t be sure. On the one hand, consider the source—this is Laban the deceiver talking. On the other, we have the instance of Samuel speaking to Saul via the witch of Endor (1 Sam 28; cf. also Balaam in Num 22:5–14). If God *did* speak to Laban, it was not to condone his method but to confirm his suspicion. Laban’s use of divination was sinful, even though he came to the correct conclusion.

¹ Finkelstein’s comment (JAOS 88 [1968] 34, n.19: “I assume that NHS here is cognate with Akk. *nahasu* ‘to flourish, prosper,’ which may be denominative of *nuhsu* ‘abundance, prosperity,’ which is the only way in which Laban’s reply makes sense.”) has caused some commentators and translations to change the reading of the verse (e.g., NLT—“I have become wealthy” or Jubilee Bible 2000—“I have learned by experience”). However, I see no compelling reason to alter the translation, given that “divination” makes sense in the context of the verse (so ESV, NASB, NIV, HCSB, ISV, NET, NRSV).