

## Boundary stones in Gen 31

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**31:44–49** *Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I; and let it be a witness between you and me.*<sup>45</sup> So Jacob took a stone, and set it up as a pillar.<sup>46</sup> And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, ‘Gather stones,’ and they took stones, and made a heap; and they ate there by the heap.<sup>47</sup> Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed.<sup>48</sup> Laban said, ‘This heap is a witness between you and me today.’ Therefore he called it Galeed,<sup>49</sup> and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, ‘The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.’ The stones are set as witnesses. The story features an etiological explanation that betrays the scholar-scribe at work, explaining geographical features to a nation that has already developed a sense of its history and asks questions regarding its land and its “original” possessors. The mound of stones in 31.46–7 is called גלעד, and in Aramaic גר שהדותא. The Hebrew of 31.47 gives: וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ לְבֵן יֵגֶר וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ גִּלְעָד whereas the Septuagint has: καὶ ἐκάλεσεν αὐτὸν Λαβαν Βουνὸς τῆς μαρτυρίας, Ἰακωβ δὲ ἐκάλεσεν αὐτὸν Βουνὸς μάρτυς. (see John Wevers). This is an explanation for ancient stone circles (the Middle-Bronze megalithic type found at [Rujm el-Hiri](#), “the cat’s foot” on the Golan), whatever their real origin.



Figure 0.1: Rujm El Hiri

How can one interpret the little linguistic lesson that is going on? The stone-heap would be marking the border between Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking people. The name given in Aramaic is long and seems scholarly and artificial, whereas the Hebrew name is short and fits

the Gil'ad region. The stones are witness to an international border, protecting against violence and preying upon women (the subtext of the Jacob story). Laban himself is the one praying here, whereas Jacob has been fulfilling his contracts which according to his claims were often changed. The historical background may be the relationship between Aramaean and Israelite monarch in the ninth to eighth centuries BCE. Notice that various parts of the Jacob's cycle of stories or life are marked by stones, that serve therefore as rhetorical boundaries. Stones appear at the end of the first stay of Jacob in Canaan, Gen. 28, then upon his return to Canaan in Gen. 31, and finally upon Rachel's death, in Gen. 35:20.

**31.53** אלהי אברהם ואלהי נחור ישפטו בינינו אלהי אביהם ויבשבע יעקב בפחד אביו יצחק: *“Let the god of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us, the god of their fathers,” and (but) Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.* Laban prudently invokes all the gods of the people involved. A redactor apparently found this formulation troublesome and prefaced everything with the formula “the gods of their fathers,” to preclude any notion of equality between Laban's god(s) and Abraham's. This sanitized text makes sure Jacob avoids the word Elohim. The writer thinks that Jacob refuses any confusion and is extricating himself from a family and people who are very close, yet distant in terms of real identity. This is followed by the strange formula of a personalized “fear of Isaac” פחד יצחק, but later, in 32.10, he invokes the “god of my father Abraham and god of my father Isaac ...” There is a sacrifice on the height: much of the meat and “bread” is consumed in communion. Here again, one needs to think about the functions of sacrifices in an agrarian and pastoral society.