

# A Closer Look

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**T**HE OLD TESTAMENT'S JACOB IS THE SON OF ISAAC AND Rebecca, and Abraham's grandson. As if siring the Twelve Tribes of Israel isn't enough, Jacob elbowed his older twin, Esau, out of his birthright inheritance, envisioned a prophetic ladder to Heaven, and sashayed with Pharaoh. In *Jacob Laying the Peeled Rods Before the Flock of Laban*, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's 1665 painting, he struts his veterinary skills, too. The story's from the Book of Genesis.

Laban, landed gentry and Rebecca's brother, wants to extend his premiere farmhand and nephew Jacob's time in his service. What would Jacob need, pay-wise? Jacob said he'd accept the next season's spotted, striped, and speckled lambs. With kinky markings, they were thought to be both rare and defective. Laban happily agreed, thinking he'd gotten a good deal.

During breeding time, Jacob, with a nudge from God, placed branches from poplar and almond trees, their bark peeled in a stripe pattern, in select spots by the stream where Laban's sheep drank. He then steered the strongest, plumpest sheep to these spots exactly. A passel of bruiser lambs, coincidentally spotted, striped, and speckled, were born. Jacob was, financially, a free man. Superstition? Folklore? God's ways are mysterious, and sometimes odd indeed.

Murillo (1617-1682) painted the scene at the peak of his career in a soothing, gauzy style. He deftly combines genre and landscape features in a picture that, at fourteen feet wide, seems cinematic. It was in Spanish and British aristocratic collections before coming to the Meadows Museum in 1967. <sup>1</sup>



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Jacob Laying Peeled Rods before the Flocks of Laban*, c. 1665.  
Oil on canvas, 87 3/4 x 142 in. (222.9 x 360.7 cm).  
Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas. Algur H. Meadows Collection, MM.67.27