

Studies in the Life of Jacob  
Part 2:

**Jacob at the Jabbok,  
Israel at Peniel**

Allen P Ross

**Introduction**

Why is it that many people of God attempt to gain the blessing of God by their own efforts? Faced with a great opportunity or a challenging task, believers are prone to take matters into their own hands and use whatever means are at their disposal. In it all there may even be a flirtation with unscrupulous and deceptive practices --especially when things become desperate.

Jacob was much like this. All his life he managed very well. He cleverly outwitted his stupid brother--twice, by securing the birth-right and by securing the blessing. And he eventually bested Laban and came away a wealthy man--surely another sign of divine blessing. Only occasionally did he realize it was God who worked through it all; but finally this truth was pressed on him most graphically in the night struggle at the ford Jabbok.

By the River Jabbok Jacob wrestled with an unidentified man till dawn and prevailed over him, and though Jacob sustained a crippling blow, he held on to receive a blessing once he perceived that his assailant was supernatural (Gen. 32:22-32). That blessing was signified by God's renaming the patriarch "Israel," to which Jacob responded by naming the place "Peniel." But because he limped away from the event, the "sons of Israel" observed a dietary restriction.

Gunkel, comparing this story with ancient myths, observes that all the features--the attack in the night by the deity, the

mystery involved, the location by the river, the hand-to-hand combat--establish the high antiquity of the story.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the unusual elements fit well with the more ancient accounts about God's dealings with men. To be sure, something unusual has been recorded, and the reader is struck immediately with many questions, some of which probably cannot be answered to any satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Who was the mysterious assailant? Why was he fighting Jacob and why was he unable to defeat the patriarch? Why did he appear afraid of being overtaken by the dawn? Why did he strike Jacob's thigh? Why was the dietary taboo not included in the Mosaic Law? What is the meaning of the name "Israel"? What is the significance of this tradition?

Von Rad warns against the false expectations of a hasty search for "the" meaning, for he along with many others is convinced that a long tradition was involved in forming and interpreting the record.<sup>3</sup> A survey of the more significant attempts to understand the present form of the text will underscore the difficulties.

#### INTERPRETATIONS

Several interpreters have suggested that this is a dream narrative. Josephus understood it to be a dream in which an apparition (*φαντάσμα*) made use of voice and words.<sup>4</sup> Roscher followed the same basic idea, but said that it was a case of incubation, induced by the obstruction of the organs of respiration, producing a vivid dream of a struggle like that of mortals with Pan Ephialtes in antiquity.<sup>5</sup>

Others have given the story an allegorical interpretation. Philo saw a spiritual conflict in literal terms, a fight of the soul against one's vices and passions.<sup>6</sup> Jacob's combatant was the Logos<sup>7</sup>; it was his virtue that became lame for a season. This allegorical approach was accepted in part by Clement of Alexandria; he said that the assailant was the Logos, but understood that the Logos remained unknown by name in the conflict because He had not yet appeared in flesh.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning with Jerome, many have understood the passage to portray long and earnest prayer. Schmidt relates how Umbreit, reacting to the concept of a fight with the Almighty, expanded this view to say it was a prayer that involved meditation in the divine presence, confession of sin, desire for pardon and regeneration, and yearning for spiritual communion.<sup>9</sup>

Jewish literature, however, recognizes that an actual fight is at the heart of the story. R. Hanna b. R. Hanina said it was a real

struggle but with the prince or angel of Esau.<sup>10</sup> Rashi followed this explanation, and the Zohar (170a) named the angel Samael, the chieftain of Esau.

The passage has proved problematic for critical analysis as well. Schmidt explains, "The usual criteria fail. Yahwe does not occur at all, not even on the lips of the renamed hero. Elohim is found everywhere, but in a way that would not be impossible even to a writer usually employing the name Yahwe. The words and phrases generally depended on by the analysis are not decisive."<sup>11</sup> As a result there has been little agreement among critical scholars. Knobel, Dillmann, Delitzsch, and Roscher assigned the passage to E (Elohim sources in the documentary hypothesis). And DeWette, Hupfeld, Kuenen, Studer, Wellhausen, Driver, Skinner, Kautzsch, Procksch, and Eichrodt assigned it to J. Some of these, however, gave Genesis 32:23 and 29 to E, and verse 32 to a glossator. W Max Muller tried to explain the confusion over the sources as being due to the disguising of the main features. He argued that the language of verse 25a was ambiguous--the low blow should have been struck by Jacob. The weeping in Hosea's account (12:4) should then be referred to the angel (according to Meyer). In short, a solution of sorts was found in the suggestion that the record had been revised in tradition.

Gunkel attempted to muster evidence from within the narrative to show that two recensions of an old story had been put together: (1) verse 25a records that the hip was dislocated by a blow, but verse 25b suggests that it happened accidentally in the course of the fight; (2) verses 26-28 present the giving of the name as the blessing, but verse 29 declares that the assailant blessed him; (3) verse 28 has Jacob victorious, but verse 30 records that he escaped with his life.<sup>12</sup>

Because of such tensions, and because Yahweh is not named in the narrative, modern critical scholars have attempted to uncover an ancient mythical story about gods fighting with heroes, a story that could have been adapted for the Jacob narratives. Fraser, Bennett, Gunkel, and Kittel thought that the old story included a river god whose enemy was the sun god which diminished the river with its rays (especially in summer). In other words the Hebrew tradition was "pure fiction" (Schmidt) based on an old myth about a river god named Jabbok who attempted to hinder anyone from crossing. Peniel was his shrine.<sup>13</sup>

The myth was also identified with the deity El, the God of the land of Canaan. McKenzie suggests that the narrative followed an

old Canaanite myth in which the "man" was at one time identified. When Jacob became attached to the story, he argues, the Canaanite deity so named was deliberately obscured,<sup>14</sup> being replaced by a mysterious being who may or may not be taken as Yahweh. This, McKenzie suggests, was left vague because there was a hesitancy to attribute such deeds to Yahweh. Later the role was transferred to intermediate beings, such as the angel of Esau.

To say that the account gradually developed from some such ancient myth greatly weakens a very important point in the history of Israel and solves none of the tensions that exist. Gevirtz, combining a synchronic study of the text with its geopolitical significance, provides a more constructive approach:

The passage cannot be dismissed merely as a bit of adopted or adapted folk-lore--a contest with a nocturnal demon, river spirit, or regional numen who opposes the river's crossing - to which "secondary" matters of cultic interest have been added, but is rather to be understood as bearing a distinct and distinctive meaning for the people who claim descent from their eponymous ancestor. Where, when, and how Jacob became Israel cannot have been matters of indifference to the Israelite author or to his audience.<sup>15</sup>

This ancient tradition about Jacob's unusual experience was recorded for Israel because the events of the patriarch's life were understood to anticipate or foreshadow events in Israel's history--receiving the blessing of the land in this case.

## ANALYSIS

*Observations.* Several observations give direction to the interpretation of the story. First, the geographical setting is important. The wrestling occurred at the threshold of the land of promise. Jacob had been outside the land ever since his flight from Esau, from whom he wrestled the blessing.

Second, the unifying element of the story is the naming, that is, the making of Jacob into Israel. The new name is not merely added to an old narrative; it is explained by it.

Third, the account is linked to a place name, Peniel. The names Peniel (Gen. 32:30), Mahanaim (Gen. 32:1-2), and Succoth (Gen. 33:17) are each given and etymologized by Jacob in his return to Canaan, and so are important to the narratives.

Fourth, the story is linked to a dietary restriction for the sons of Israel. This taboo was a custom that grew up on the basis of an event, but was not part of the Law. The event in the tradition both created and explained it.

*Significance.* The theme of the story is the wrestling--no one suggests anything else. However, one cannot study the account in isolation from the context of the Jacob cycle of stories. The connection is immediately strengthened by the plays on the names. At the outset are יַעֲקֹב, the man, יַבֹּק, the place, and יִיאָבֵק the action. These similar sounding words attract the reader's attention. Before, a "Jacob" might cross the "Jabbok" to the land of blessing, he must fight. He attempted once more to trip up his adversary, for at that point he was met by someone wishing to have a private encounter with him, and he was forced into the match. Fokkelman says:

Tripping his fellow-men by the heel (׳qb) has for Jacob come to its extreme consequence: a wrestling (׳bq) with a "man" which to Jacob is the most shocking experience of his life, as appears from the fact that thereafter he proceeds through life a man changed of name, and thus of nature, and under the new name he becomes the patriarch of the "Israelites." (This comes out even more strongly in Jacob's own confession in v. 31) [English v. 30].<sup>16</sup>

Ryle notes that the physical disability he suffered serves as a memorial of the spiritual victory and a symbol of the frailty of human strength in the crisis when God meets man face to face.<sup>17</sup>

*Structure.* The event recorded in the narrative gives rise to two names: God renames Jacob "Israel," and Israel names the place "Peniel." It is clear that these names reflect a new status because of the divine blessing. Therefore everything in the record leads up to the giving of the name "Israel"; the giving of the name "Peniel" reflects the significance of the entire encounter as it was understood by Jacob. These names together provide a balanced picture of the significant event.

In a helpful analysis of the structure of this passage, Barthes evaluates the namings as follows:<sup>18</sup>

1. The demand of a name, _____ from God to Jacob (v. 27)	The response _____ of Jacob (v. 27)	The result: name change (v. 28)
2. The demand of a name, _____ from Jacob of God (v. 29)	An indirect _____ response (v. 29)	The result: decision   Name change: Peniel (v. 30)

This parallel arrangement is instructive: The direct response of Jacob to his assailant leads to his being renamed "Israel"; but the indirect response of the assailant leads Jacob to name the place

"Peniel," for he realized that it was God who fought ("Israel") with him face to face ("Peniel"). One name is given by the Lord to Jacob; the other name is given by Jacob in submission to the Lord.

The passage may be divided into three sections with a prologue and epilogue. Of the three sections, the first (the event, vv 24b-25) prepares for the second (the blessing, vv 26-28), and the third (the evaluation, vv 29-30) reflects the first two.

### **The Narrative**

#### **PROLOGUE (32:22-24a)**

These opening verses record the crossing of the Jabbok by Jacob and his family. Because verses 22-32 provide an interlude in the return of Jacob to Canaan,<sup>19</sup> they can be understood as a unit with their parts treated accordingly. The first verse (v. 22) provides a summary statement of the crossing of the river by the entire clan. The crossing is then developed in verses 23-31. Verse 23 introduces the narrative; verse 31 completes it. Between the time Jacob sent his family across and the time he joined them, the wrestling and blessing occurred.

Jacob's being left alone (v. 24a) is not explained. One suggestion is that he intended to spend the night in prayer before meeting Esau. This harmonizes with the allegorical view of the wrestling. More likely, however, Jacob was anticipating an encounter with Esau, and so at night he began crossing the river to establish his ground in the land.<sup>20</sup> Whether he anticipated an encounter in the night or simply was caught alone, is difficult to say. If Jacob remained behind to make sure everything was safely across, then the meeting came as a complete surprise.<sup>21</sup> When he was alone, he was attacked by a man--he was caught in the match.

At any rate the narrative goes to great lengths to isolate Jacob on one side of the river. The question of his plans is irrelevant to the story. The important point is that he was alone.

#### **THE FIGHT (32:24b-25)**

Only four sentences in the Hebrew are used for the fight; no details are given, for the fight is but the preamble to the most important part--the dialogue. Yet the fight was real and physical. Dillmann says the limping shows it was a physical occurrence in a material world.<sup>22</sup> The memory of Israel's limping away from the night that gave rise to the dietary restriction attests to the physical reality of the event.

The verb used to describe the wrestling is **וַיִּאָבֵק**, "and he wrestled." It is rare, being found only here in verse 24 and in verse 25. Since the word **אָבַק** "dust," this denominative verb perhaps carries the idea of "get dusty" in wrestling. Spurrell suggests that it might possibly be connected to **אָבַק**, or that it might be a dialectical variant of this for a wordplay.<sup>23</sup>

Martin-Achard concludes that this very rare verb was selected because of assonance with **אָבַק** and **אָבַק** the sounds b/v and k/q forming strong alliterations at the beginning of the Story.<sup>24</sup> The verb plays on the name of the river as if to say **אָבַק** were equal to **אָבַק**, meaning a "wrestling, twisting" river.<sup>25</sup> The wordplay employs the name of the river as a perpetual reminder of the most important event that ever happened there.

At this spot "a man" wrestled with Jacob. The word **אִישׁ** is open to all interpretations. It suggests a mystery but reveals nothing.<sup>26</sup> But this is fitting, for the "man" would refuse to reveal himself directly. The effect of the word choice is that the reader is transported to Jacob's situation. Jacob perceived only that a male antagonist was closing in on him. The reader learns his identity as Jacob did--by his words and actions.

The time of the match is doubly significant. On the one hand it is interesting that the struggle was at night. Darkness concealed the adversary's identity. The fact that he wished to be gone by daylight shows that he planned the night visit. As it turned out, had the assailant come in the daytime, Jacob would have recognized the man's special authority (v 29) and identity (v 30b). If Jacob had perceived whom he was going to have to fight, he would never have started the fight, let alone continued with his peculiar obstinacy.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand the fact that the wrestling lasted till the breaking of day suggests a long, indecisive bout. Indeed, the point is that the assailant could not be victorious until he resorted to something extraordinary.

The turning point of the long bout is clear. After a long, indecisive struggle, the man "touched" Jacob. The "touch" was actually a blow--he dislocated his hip.<sup>28</sup> But the text uses a soft term for it, demonstrating a supernatural activity (cf. Isa. 6:7, he "touched" Isaiah's "lips").

The effect of this blow is clear. The assailant gave himself an unfair advantage over the patriarch, for he was already more than a match for Jacob. The one who might be expected to take advantage of the other was himself crippled by a supernatural blow from his

assailant. In a word, like so many of his own rivals. Jacob now came against something for which he was totally unprepared.

#### THE BLESSING (32:26-28)

The blow was revealing for Jacob. The true nature of the nameless adversary began to dawn on him as the physical darkness began to lift. He is the One who has power over the affairs of men! He said, "Let me go, for the day breaks!" (author's trans.). But Jacob, having been transformed from a devious fighter into a forthright and resolute one,<sup>29</sup> held on for a blessing.<sup>30</sup> He said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (v. 26).<sup>31</sup> Fokkelman characterizes Jacob by stating that "from the most miserable situation he wants to emerge an enriched man."<sup>32</sup> Jacob may not have been aware of all the implications (the narrator certainly was), but he knew the source of blessing.

The blessing for which Jacob pleaded finds expression in a changed name. The assailant first asked the patriarch, "What is your name?" (v. 27)--undoubtedly a rhetorical question. The object was to contrast the old name with the new. When one remembers the significance of names, the point becomes clear: a well-established nature, a fixed pattern of life must be turned back radically! In giving his name, Jacob had to reveal his nature. This name, at least for the narratives, designated its owner as a crafty overreacher. Here the "heel-catcher" was caught and had to identify his true nature before he could be blessed.<sup>33</sup>

"And he said, 'Not Jacob shall your name be called from now on, but Israel, for you have fought with God and man and have prevailed'" (v. 28, author's trans.). This renaming of Jacob is an assertion of the assailant's authority to impart a new life and new status (cf. 2 Kings 23:34; 24:17).

What is the meaning of the name "Israel"? Both Genesis 32:28 and Hosea 12:3 interpret the meaning of the name with a verb "to fight."<sup>34</sup> The meaning of "Israel" would then be defined as "God contends, may God contend, persist."<sup>35</sup> Based on the context in Genesis, the verb should be understood in the sense of fighting.

Coote analyzes Genesis 32:28b<sup>36</sup> and concludes that (a) the syllabic meter is 8:8; (b) the parallel pairs are sry//ykl, 'm//m, and 'lhym//nsym; (c) the archaic parallelism of the suffixed and prefixed conjugations is present; and (d) the arrangement is chiasmatic (sry-twkl). The last word is isolated to combine the clause:

ky sryt `m 'lhym	"for you fought with God
w `m 'nsym wtwkl	and with men, and you prevailed"



Therefore the root שָׁרָה is used to explain the name יִשְׂרָאֵל because it sounds the same, is derived from the very story, and is otherwise infrequent.<sup>38</sup> The verb יָכַל is used to explain the outcome of שָׁרָה.

So the narrative signifies that the name יִשְׂרָאֵל means "God fights." It is as if one were to say אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; the idea is similar to the epithet יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת.<sup>39</sup> But the meaning of the name involves an interpolation of the elements: "God fights" is explained by "you fought with God." Thus the name is but a motto and a reminder of the seizing of the blessing which would be a pledge of victory and success.<sup>40</sup> Gunkel states that this explanation of the significance of the name was affectionately and proudly employed to show the nature of the nation to be invincible and triumphant; with God's help Israel would fight the entire world and when necessary would fight even God Himself.<sup>41</sup>

Many have been troubled by the difficulties with this explanation. First, if the name means "God fights," then how is it reversed to say Jacob fights with God? The name must be explained on the basis of Semitic name formations. Consequently the form is an imperfect plus a noun that is the subject, as Nestle pointed out long ago.<sup>42</sup> Thus any interpretation with El as object drops out of consideration as the morphological etymology of the name.<sup>43</sup>

Second, the verb שָׁרָה is very rare, making a clear definition difficult. It occurs only in connection with this incident. But the meaning of שָׁרָה may be "contend" and not "fight." Since God has no rivals, such a name is unparalleled and unthinkable.<sup>44</sup>

Third, the versions did not all understand the distinction between שָׁרָה, "to contend," and שָׁרָר, "to rule." The Septuagint has ἐνίσχυσας, Aquila has ἤρξας, Symmachus has ἤρξω, and the Vulgate has *fortis fuisti*. The problem may be traced to the pointing of the verb וַיִּשָּׂר in Hosea 12:4, which seems to be from a geminate root שָׁרָר (Symmachus, Aquila, and Onkelos). As a result the versions and commentators follow either the idea of "rule" or "contend, oppose" (Josephus).<sup>45</sup>

Various other suggestions for the etymology of "Israel" have been made.<sup>46</sup> A. Haldar suggests that the root is isr/sr, "happy," and that it could possibly be connected to the Canaanite god Asherah.<sup>47</sup> In this view the name change would represent the merging of the two religions.

E. Jacob connects the name with the root יָשַׁר, "just, right."<sup>48</sup> He finds confirmation for this idea in the noun "Jeshurun" (יִשְׂרֹן), Deut. 32:15; 33:5; 33:26; Isa. 44:2), a poetic designation of Israel,

as well as in the words "Book of Jashar" (סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר), the old collection of national songs (Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18). This could be the book of Israel, the righteous one, the hero of God, according to E. Jacob.<sup>49</sup> The major problem with this interpretation is that it involves a change of the sibilant.

Albright takes the name from *yasar* "to cut, saw," with a developed meaning of "heal": "God heals."<sup>50</sup> He finds Arabic *wasara*, "cut, saw"; Akkadian *sararu*, "shine" (cf. *sarru*, "king"); and Ethiopic *saraya*, "cure, heal," to be the most plausible roots. In connection with the root *wasara*, he points out that the Arabic root *nasara*, "revive," could be equated due to morphological contamination of I-Waw and I-Nun roots. Albright argues that the original name was \*Yasir-'el from a verbal stem יָשַׁר, with the developed meaning of "heal" (supported by Ethiopic *saraya*, and the equation/interchange in Arabic of *nasara* for *wasara*). He states, "The fact that the stem *yasar* is not found in biblical Hebrew is rather in favor of the combination, since its disappearance would explain how the meaning of the name came to be so thoroughly forgotten."<sup>51</sup>

Coote, also using the strong letters sr (1-Yod, I-Nun, Geminate, reduplicated, or III weak), chooses the Akkadian root *wasaru* and traces a semantic development of cutting>deciding>counseling (Arabic *'asara*, "counsel" and *musir*, "counselor").<sup>52</sup> He notes that the root *htk*, "cut," develops to mean "decide or determine." Coote's idea is that *htk* and *sry* are parallel in root meaning and development.

Coote finds confirmatory evidence in Isaiah 9:6-7, where there is confluence of *sar* and *sry* as in Genesis 32. The word for "government" is the key there. He concludes that the name יִשְׂרָאֵל means "El judges" and is from either *ysr* or *sry*. It has the meaning of govern by rendering a decree or judgment (Ps. 82:1).

Noth, taking it to be from a third weak root *sara*, suggests the meaning "to rule, be lord over."<sup>53</sup> Through this, God takes action in the world and particularly helps His own. "Israel" then means "God will rule" or "May God rule."

It is certainly possible that one of these Semitic roots is etymologically connected to the name, and that the name meant something like "judge" or "heal" at one time (for the name occurred before this time, as the Eblaite material suggests).<sup>54</sup> The popular etymology in Genesis is giving the significance of the name.<sup>55</sup> But most of these other suggestions are no more compelling than the popular etymology given in the text of Genesis. The fact that the

word is rare should not lead to the assumption that it means "contend" or "vie with" as a rival. The concept of God's fighting with someone is certainly no more a problem than the passage itself. And the reversal of the emphasis (from "God fights" to "fight with God") in the explanation is because of the nature of popular etymologies, which are satisfied with a wordplay on the sound or meaning of the name to express its significance.

The name serves to evoke the memory of the fight. The name ("God fights") is freely interpreted to say that God is the object of Jacob's struggle.<sup>56</sup> Hearing the name **יְשַׁרְאֵל** one would recall the incident in which Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed. These words were full of hope to the Israelites. Dillmann says that even after the name would tell the Israelites that when Jacob contended successfully with God, he won the battle with man.<sup>57</sup> Thus the name "God fights" and the popular explanation "you prevailed" obtain a significance for future struggles.

#### THE RESPONSE (32:29-30)

Jacob afterward attempted to discover his adversary's name. The "man" had acted with full powers and spoken with authority. He had gotten to the bottom of Jacob's identity; He could not be mortal. Thus Jacob sought to discover His name. But the answer was cautious: "Why do you ask my name?" (author's trans.).

On the one hand it is as if He was saying to Jacob, "Think, and you will know the answer!"<sup>58</sup> But on the other hand He was unwilling to release His name for Jacob to control. The divine name cannot be had on demand nor taken in vain, for that would expose it to the possibility of magical manipulation.<sup>59</sup>

Jacob had to be content with a visitation from a "man" whom he realized was divine. Jacob might have recalled that Abram was visited by "men" (Gen. 18) with such powers. Lot also received those men in the night, and was saved alive when the sun arose (Gen. 19). Apparently this was the manner of manifestation of the Lord in Genesis.

Jacob named the place "Peniel" because he had seen God face to face and had been delivered. This is the second part of the basic structure. First, God demanded and changed his name. Here, Jacob was not given the divine name, but named the place to commemorate the event. He had power over that realm, but could not overreach it. The play on the name is clear: Having seen God "face to face" he named the place Peniel, "face of God."<sup>60</sup>

The impact of the encounter was shocking for Jacob. Seeing God was something no man survived (Gen. 48:16; Exod. 19:21; 24:10; Judg. 6:11, 22; Judg. 13). But this appearance of the "man" guaranteed deliverance for the patriarch. God had come as close to Jacob as was imaginable. Jacob exclaimed, "I have seen God face to face and I have been delivered" (Gen. 32:30, author's trans.). The idea is not "and yet" I have been delivered, but rather "and my life has been delivered" (לַיָּצִי). His prayer for deliverance (vv. 9-12) was answered by God in this face-to-face encounter and blessing.<sup>61</sup> Meeting God "face to face" meant that he could now look Esau directly in the eye.

#### EPILOGUE (32:31-32)

Verse 31 provides the conclusion for the narrative. As the sun rose, Jacob crossed over Peniel with a limp. Ewald says that he limped on his thigh "as if the crookedness, which had previously adhered to the moral nature of the wily Jacob, had now passed over into an external physical attribute only."<sup>62</sup>

The final verse of the story is an editorial note that explains a dietary restriction that developed on account of this event. The wounding of the thigh of Jacob caused the "children of Israel" not to eat of the sciatic nerve "until this day." This law does not form part of the Sinaitic Code, and so according to some scholars may have been a later custom in Israel. This is argued from the fact that the reference is made to Israelites rather than the "sons of Jacob," suggesting that the custom is post-Sinaitic.

The expression "until this day" is usually taken as a sure sign of an etiological note. Childs concludes that in the majority of the cases it is the expression of a personal testimony added to and confirming a received tradition, a commentary on existing customs.<sup>63</sup> He concludes that this cultic practice was introduced secondarily into the narrative. It provided a causal relation for the customary taboo.<sup>64</sup>

#### Summary

##### THE NATURE OF JACOB

The special significance of Jacob's becoming Israel is the purification of character. Peniel marks the triumph of the higher over the lower elements of his life; but if it is a triumph for the higher elements, it is a defeat for the lower. The outcome of the match is a paradox. The victor ("you ... have prevailed," Gen.

32:28) wept (Hos. 12:4) and pleaded for a blessing: once blessed he emerged, limping on a dislocated hip. How may this be a victory and a blessing?

*The defeat of Jacob.* Because Jacob was guilty, he feared his brother and found God an adversary. Jacob prepared to meet Esau, whom he had deceived, but the patriarch had to meet God first. God broke Jacob's strength before blessing him with the promise of real strength (the emphasis is on God's activity).

When God touched the strongest sinew of Jacob, the wrestler, it shriveled, and with it Jacob's persistent self-confidence.<sup>65</sup> His carnal weapons were lamed and useless--they failed him in his contest with God. He had always been sure of the result only when he helped himself, but his trust in the naked force of his own weapons was now without value.

*The victory of Jacob.* What he had surmised for the past 20 years now dawned on him--he was in the hands of One against whom it is useless to struggle. One wrestles on only when he thinks his opponent can be beaten. With the crippling touch, Jacob's struggle took a new direction. With the same scrappy persistence he clung to his Opponent for a blessing. His goal was now different. Now crippled in his natural strength he became bold in faith.

Thus it became a show of significant courage. Jacob won a blessing that entailed changing his name. It must be stressed that he was not wrestling with a river demon or Esau or his alter ego, but with One who was able to bless him.

He emerged from the encounter an altered man. After winning God's blessing legitimately, the danger with Esau vanished. He had been delivered.

## THE PROMISES TO JACOB

What, then, is the significance of this narrative within the structure of the patriarchal history? In the encounter the emphasis on promise and fulfillment seems threatened. At Bethel a promise was given: at the Jabbok fulfillment seemed to be barred as God opposed Jacob's entrance into the land. Was there a change of attitude with Yahweh who promised the land? Or was this simply a test?

In a similar but different story, Moses was met by God because he had not complied with God's will (Exod. 4:24). With Jacob, however, the wrestling encounter and name changes took on a greater significance because he was at the frontier of the land promised to the seed of Abraham. God, the real Proprietor of the

land, opposed his entering as Jacob. If it were only a matter of mere strength, then He let Jacob know he would never enter the land.<sup>66</sup>

The narrative, then, supplies a moral judgment on the crafty Jacob who was almost destroyed in spite of the promise. Judging from Jacob's clinging for a blessing, the patriarch made the same judgment on himself.

#### THE DESCENDANTS OF JACOB

On the surface the story seems to be a glorification of the physical strength and bold spirit of the ancestor of the Israelites.<sup>67</sup> However, like so much of the patriarchal history, it is transparent as a type of what Israel, the nation, experienced from time to time with God.<sup>68</sup> The story of Israel the man serves as an acted parable of the life of the nation, in which the nation's entire history with God is presented, almost prophetically, as a struggle until the breaking of day.<sup>69</sup> The patriarch portrays the real spirit of the nation, engaging in the persistent struggle with God until they emerge strong in His blessing. Consequently the nation is referred to as Jacob or Israel, depending on which characteristics predominate.

The point of the story for the nation of Israel entering the land of promise is clear: Israel's victory will come not by the usual ways nations gain power, but by the power of the divine blessing. And later in her history Israel would be reminded that the restoration to the land would not be by might, nor by strength, but by the Spirit of the Lord God who fights for His people (Zech. 4:6). The blessings of God come by His gracious, powerful provisions, not by mere physical strength or craftiness. In fact there are times when God must cripple the natural strength of His servants so that they may be bold in faith.

#### NOTES

1 Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1917), p. 361. Gunkel understands these features to be characteristic of a certain type of religious story in which the hero fights a god (e.g., Hercules). His observation of the antiquity of the story must be seen in this connection.

2 Nathaniel Schmidt points out that the passage was intended to answer certain questions about customs and traditions: yet on a closer reading many other questions surface ("The Numen of Peniel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 45 [1926]:265).

3 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John Marks (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 319.

4 Josephus *Antiquities* 1. 331.

5 W. H. Roscher, "Ephialtes," *Abh. d. phil.-hist. Classe. k. sächsischen Ges. d.*

- Wissenschaften* 20 (1906), cited by Schmidt, "The Numen of Penuel," p. 263.
- 6 Philo *Legum allegoriarum* 3. 190.
- 7 Philo *De mutatione nominum* 87.
- 8 Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 1. 7. 57.
- 9 Schmidt, "The Numen of Penuel," p. 263.
- 10 *Midrash Genesis* 77. 3.
- 11 Schmidt, "The Numen of Penuel," p. 267.
- 12 On the other hand such tensions can be plausibly harmonized: verse 25b may be the natural effect of verse 25a, the giving of the name is the token of the blessing, and the victory involves the crippling of human devices.
- 13 Schmidt, "The Numen of Penuel," p. 269.
- 14 John L. McKenzie, "Jacob at Peniel: Gen. 32:24-32," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963):73.
- 15 S. Gevirtz. "Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford.-*Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975):50. While Gevirtz's reaction to these suggestions is helpful, his own interpretation is rather fanciful, as will be mentioned later.
- 16 J. Fokkelman. *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen. Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), p. 210.
- 17 Herbert E. Ryle. *The Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1914), p. 323.
- 18 R. Barthes, "La Lutte avec L'Ange," in *Analyse structurale et Exegese Biblique*, by R. Barthes, F Bovon, F J. Laenhardt, R. Martin-Achard, and J. Starobinski, Bibliothique Theologique (Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestle Editeurs, 1971), p. 35.
- 19 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 211.
- 20 The River Jabbok is the *Wadi ez-Zerka*. "the blue," that is, a clear mountain stream. It is on the frontier of the land.
- 21 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 211.
- 22 A. Dillmann, *Genesis, Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, trans. B. Stevenson, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1897), 2:281.
- 23 G. J. Spurrell, *Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis*, 2d ed. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 282.
- 24 R. Martin-Achard, "Un Exegete Devant Genesis 32:23-33," *Analyse structurale et Exegese Biblique*, p. 60.
- 25 Gunkel says, "Ye'abeq-das Wort nur bier and 26; Anspielusig and wisprunglich wol Erklarungs versuch des Namens Yabboq" (*Genesis*, p. 326).
- 26 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*. p. 213.
- 27 Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 320.
- 28 The verb **נִפְּץ** implies a separation or dislocation. It is used figuratively in Jeremiah 6:8 and Ezekiel 23:18. In the Hiphil it represents some form of execution, but its precise form is uncertain. The solemn execution of the seven men in 2 Samuel 21:6 may be a hanging or impaling.
- 29 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971), p. 255.
- 30 Von Rad suggests that this is a basic feature of human nature. In desperation Jacob clung to the divine for help (*Genesis*, p. 321).
- 31 It may be observed that the praying began after the fight was over. So the fighting cannot signify intense praying.
- 32 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 215.
- 33 The name Jacob has as its probable meaning "May he protect" or in its fullest form. Jacob-el, "may God protect" (Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rah men dergemeinernitischen Na mengebung* [Stuttgart: Verlag von W Kohlhanmer, 1928]. pp. 177-78: also see W F Albright, *From the Stone Aye to Christianity* [Garden City. NY: Doubleday & Co., 1957], p. 237, n. 51). The protection is that of a rearguard, one who follows behind the group. In the naming of the infant (Gen. 25), the mother selected a name that would instantly recall how the

- younger child grasped the heel of his brother (עָקַב/יַעֲקֹב) -after all, the mother had received the oracle about the twins and so would note such unusual developments. But the parents would in no wise name a child "overreacher" or "deceitful." But in his lifetime Jacob "tripped" his brother twice, prompting Esau to reinterpret his name: "Is he not rightly called Jacob? He has deceived me these two times" (Gen. 27:36, author's trans.). After those incidents the significance of the name became that of a deceiver, one who dogged the heels of another to trip him and take unfair advantage. Jeremiah later would say, "Every brother is a Jacob... (Jer. 9:4, author's trans.).
- 34 R. B. Coote, "Hosea XII," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971):394.
- 35 Taken after the analogy of other names, יְשַׁרְאֵל maybe a jussive, "Let God fight," or a simple imperfect, "God fights/will fight" (G. H. Skipworth, "The Tetragrammaton: Its Meaning and Origin," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 10[1897-981:666]. Also note *Encyclopedia Biblica*, s.v. "Personal Names," by Th. Noldeke, 3:3271-3307.
- 36 Robert Coote, "The Meaning of the Name Israel," *Harvard Theological Review* 65 (1972):137.
- 37 Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), par. 1334. See also James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 19-23.
- 38 Coote, "Hosea XII," p. 394.
- 39 Robertson Smith writes: "The very name of Israel is martial, and means 'God (El) fighteth,' and Jehovah in the Old Testament is *Iahwe cebaoth*, the Jehovah of the armies of Israel. It was on the battlefield that Jehovah's presence was most clearly realized. ..." (*The Prophets of Israel* [Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1882], p. 36).
- 40 John Skinner, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913), p. 409.
- 41 Gunkel writes, "Es ist ein grossartiger und sicherlich uralter Gedanke Israels, es sei im Stande, nicht nur die ganze Welt mit Gottes Hilfe, sondern auch, wo nötig Gott selber zu bekämpfen and zu überwinden" (*Genesis*, p. 328). Gunkel restated this in the 1917 edition: "denn wen selbst die Gottheit nicht bezwingen konnte, den wird kein Feind bawaltigen!"
- 42 Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, p. 208.
- 43 W F Albright, "The Names 'Israel' and 'Judah' with an Excursus on the Etymology of Todah and Torah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 46 (1927):159. Nestle's discussion was in *Die israelitischen Eigennamen*. There are exceptions, of course, such as יְהִלְלֵאל in 2 Chronicles 29:12.
- 44 Albright, "The Names 'Israel' and 'Judah.' "
- 45 The pointing of יְשַׁרְאֵל is in itself unexpected; a shewa would be expected under the ך. Albright suggests a secondary development under the influence of the Greek tradition (Albright follows Max Margolis, "The Pronunciation of the אֶשׁ according to New Hexaplaric Material," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* [1909]:66). When the shewa is followed by a laryngeal we have an a vowel in Greek (Ἰσραηλ). So the shewa had an a coloring before the weak laryngeal in the pre-Masoretic age. The Masoretes, under the influence of Aramaic reduced a short a in the open syllable to shewa, except in two well-known names, יְשַׁרְאֵל and יְשַׁמְעֵאל where it was too well-established to be eliminated (Albright, "The Names of 'Israel' and 'Judah,'" p. 161).
- 46 For a thorough discussion, see G. A. Danell, *Studies in the Name Israel in the Old Testament* (Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeri, 1946), pp. 22-28.
- 47 *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, S.V. "Israel, Name and Associations of," by A. Haldar, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 2:765.
- 48 "El est droit on juste" (Edmond Jacob, *Theologie de L'Ancient Testament* [Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestle Editeurs, 1955], p. 155 [p. 203 in the English translation]). Jacob says that the explanation given in Genesis is philologically untenable.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 50.



- 50 Albright, "The Names 'Israel' and 'Judah.'" p. 166.
- 51 Ibid., p. 168. Of course the fact that a root  $\text{קָרַח}$ , meaning "fight," is rare was taken as an objection to that meaning. Argument based on rarity loses its force.
- 52 Coote, "The Meaning of the Name Israel," p. 139.
- 53 Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, pp. 191. 208.
- 54 Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981), p. 249.
- 55 Popular etymologies are satisfied with a loose connection between the words. Rarely are they precise etymologies such as with the explanation of Joseph in Genesis 30:23-24 ( $\text{יִוָּסַף}$ , "may he add"). Most often they express a wish or sentiment that is loosely connected by a wordplay. For example, Seth is explained with  $\text{שֵׁת}$ , "he appointed": Simeon with  $\text{שָׁמַע}$ . "he heard": Ephraim with  $\text{הִפְרִינִי}$ , "he made me fruitful": Levi with  $\text{יִלְוֶה}$  "he will be attached": Judah with  $\text{אֶזְכְּרֶה}$ , "I will praise." On occasion the popular etymology employs a completely different root. For example, Jabez ( $\text{יַבֶּז}$ ) is explained with the word:  $\text{עָצַב}$  and Reuben is explained with  $\text{רָאָה בְּעֵינָי$ , "he has looked on my affliction." Such popular etymologies are more interested in the significance of the name than in the technical etymology.
- 56 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 322.
- 57 Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2: 279.
- 58 Fokkelman. *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 218.
- 59 A. S. Herbert, *Genesis 12-50: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 108.
- 60 Here the word is spelled  $\text{פְּנִיאל}$ , but later  $\text{פְּנוּאל}$  (LXX has  $\text{Εἶδος Θεοῦ}$ ). The  $\text{ל}$  and the  $\text{י}$  that serve as binding vowels are probably old case endings (see E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. 2d ed. [Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1910], p. 254, para. 90o, and Spurrell, *Notes on the Text of the Book of Genesis*, p. 284). Skinner suggests that it is not improbable that the place is named for its resemblance to a face (Genesis, p. 410; Strabo mentions such a Phoenician promontory  $\text{θεοῦ πρόσωπον}$  [16. 2. 15-16]). The story would then be an etiological narrative designed to explain such a phenomenon. More likely the name was used to fit the experience rather than the experience to fit the name.
- 61 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, p. 219.
- 62 Heinrich Ewald. *The History of Israel*, trans. R. Martineau, 8 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1876), 1:358.
- 63 Brevard S. Childs, 'A Study of the Formula, 'Until This Day,' " *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963):292.
- 64 Ibid., p. 288.
- 65 Marcus Dods, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1892), p. 300.
- 66 Dillmann, *Genesis* 2:280.
- 67 The figure of Jacob is exalted in Isaiah 41:8; 44:1, 2, 21; 48:20; and 49:3. Compare, however, the juxtaposition of Jacob and Israel in 1 Kings 18:3 1.
- 68 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 325.
- 69 But the direction Gevirtz takes on this is surely extreme. He argues that the sinew of the hip ( $\text{גִּיד הַנֶּשֶׂה}$ ) is an allusion to Gad and Manasseh, who had the Jabbok as their common border. The lesson of the allusion was then that the emergence of Israel depended on the confederation of Gad and Manasseh.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary  
3909 Swiss Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75204  
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)