

Genesis 32:22-32

Jacob at Peniel

Any one of us can attest to the fact that life is full of struggles. And I do not mean the historical conflicts of nations and peoples over resources and land. I mean the daily contests we all face as we move moment by moment through life. We have personal struggles, family struggles, and spiritual struggles. Even today we will witness a struggle between leaders of Native American war bands and intrepid settlers heading west to make their fortune, when the Chiefs and 49ers square off in Super Bowl LIV.

After Jacob had watched Laban leave, he had turned his attention to facing his brother Esau. Twenty years ago, when those two brothers had separated, they had done so because Esau had threatened, and was even planning, to murder Jacob. All Esau was waiting for was for their father, Isaac, to die. After that, Jacob was a dead man.

And Jacob knew all of this. He had fled Canaan at the behest of his mother and spent twenty years in Paddan-aram, among distant, and not always friendly, relatives. But then, God had commanded him to return to Canaan. So Jacob took his wives, his children, and all of his possessions and made his way home. He knew Esau, but he also was beginning to know his God, and Jacob trusted his God to continue to offer the protection He had so generously provided thus far.

In preparation for their meeting, Jacob had separated a considerable portion of his flocks and herds to send before him as a present to his estranged brother. He hoped these gifts would assuage Esau's anger. Now, having watched his servants depart with the chosen animals, Jacob made ready to meet Esau. But that encounter was not to happen yet. God had still one more experience for Jacob. So Jacob again came upon an unexpected diversion.

Final Preparations

At some point during the evening, Jacob accompanied his wives, their maidservants, and his eleven sons as they crossed the Jabbok river. ²²Now he arose that same night and took his two wives and his two maids and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream. And he sent across whatever he had" (v. 22-23). That Jacob's daughter Dinah had disappeared from the narrative need not concern us. This was a patriarchal society, and she was not to be the founder of a tribe of Israel.

The Jabbok river was located in eastern Canaan and flowed through severe, deep canyons. It entered the Jordan river about twenty-three miles north of the Dead Sea. It was known as the "blue river" and formed the natural division of Gilead into two parts (Deuteronomy 3:13, 16). As it flowed from its source at some 1900 feet above sea level to its confluence with the Jordan at only 115 feet above sea level, the river gained speed. It was shallow, however, and thus was quite easily fordable nonetheless. In fact, the action described in these verses may indicate that Jacob crossed the river more than once during the night.

Thus it seemed that Jacob had chosen to improvise on the plan that he had previously developed. Now he also sent his family to face Esau first, along with his gifts of flocks and herds. Was he hoping that if Esau

saw them he might spare his brother? Was he hoping that if Esau were still unappeasable, he might come after Jacob and his family would be spared? Scripture does not say. But we do know that, eventually, when the time came to finally meet Esau face-to-face, “²He put the maids and their children in front, and Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother” (Genesis 33:2-3). So, Jacob was no coward, hiding behind his family. He had simply chosen to spend this last night alone as he prepared to meet his brother.

Jacob Struggles with God

Then one of the most extraordinary, and puzzling, events in all of Scripture is described in only a few words. “Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (v. 24). That Jacob was alone reminds the reader that this could not have been some mere mortal.

At first, the narrator described Jacob’s assailant as a man. It is only later that we learn this ‘man’ was an angel. But this is not an example of an error or inconsistency in Scripture. Instead, the writer was giving us Jacob’s perspective of the event as it happened. In other words, one thing that the author might be trying to accomplish here was to remind his readers that it was impossible for mere mortals to discern the presence of God with Him letting us know He was present. Consider,

“¹Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. ²When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth” (Genesis 18:1-2).

“¹Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²And he said, ‘now behold, my lords, please turn aside into your servant’s house, and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise early and go on your way’” (Genesis 19:1-2).

So by describing Jacob’s opponent as a ‘man,’ Scripture is neither being misleading nor is it in error. The writer was clearly hoping to relate the narrative from Jacob’s perspective.

Perhaps to our surprise, no motive is given for the assault. Jacob was alone and the man came simply upon him. Apparently no warning was given. But certainly finding himself in another struggle could not have been a total surprise for Jacob. We must remember that challenges had characterized his life.

From the womb - “²²But the children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘if it is so, why then am I this way?’ So she went to inquire of the Lord . . . ²⁵Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob” (Genesis 25:22, 25-26).

With Esau - “²⁹When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; ³⁰and Esau said to Jacob, ‘please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished.’ Therefore his name was called Edom. ³¹But Jacob said, ‘first sell me your birthright’” (Genesis 25:29-31).

With Isaac - “¹⁸Then he came to his father and said, ‘my father.’ And he said, ‘here I am. Who are you, my son?’ ¹⁹Jacob said to his father, ‘I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me’” (Genesis 27:18-19).

With Laban - “³⁸These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten the rams of your flocks. ³⁹That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. You required it of my hand whether stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes” (Genesis 31:38-40).

While we must admit that this passage is unusual, it is not unique in Scripture. Remember the equally enigmatic narrative from the life of Moses,

“²⁴Now it came about at the lodging place on the way that the Lord met him [Moses] and sought to put him to death. ²⁵Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and threw it at Moses’ feet, and she said, ‘you are indeed a bridegroom of blood to me.’ ²⁶So He let him alone. At that time she said, ‘you are a bridegroom of blood’ - because of the circumcision” (Exodus 4:24-26).

Yet, this is such a bewildering account, that many scholars have tried to explain it away. For example, some interpreters have chosen to read in the account a typical construct of many ancient pagan cultures involving a clash between a god and a mortal. In this case, what was supposedly taking place was that a river god was prohibiting Jacob’s crossing the Jabbok until the human gave the god some sort of gift or worship. Yet, this exposition does not make sense, since Scripture had already mentioned that Jacob had crossed the river at least once, and perhaps several times, as he readied his caravan to meet Esau.

Taking the narrative at face value, we see that as the battle continued, Jacob proved a challenging opponent. So, “when he [the angel] saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him” (v. 25). We can appreciate that Jacob had great strength, for “when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother” (Genesis 29:10). Apparently, Jacob was no one to be trifled with.

Yet, we cannot conclude from this account that a man could physically overpower an angel. After all, just the mere ‘touch’ of the angel proved sufficient to render Jacob sore and limping. More was going on here than that. The physical metaphor that this struggle represented, was used by God for greater purposes. For example, the word for ‘thigh’ can also mean or ‘loin’ and, as such, can be seen as the source of the nation of Israel. “¹Now these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob; they came each one with his household: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; ³Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; ⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. ⁵All the persons who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number, but Joseph was already in Egypt” (Exodus 1:1-5). Thus Jacob was being lamed in the very place that represented the future promise of seed. God was, perhaps, reminding Jacob of His sovereignty over the future of His people.

A New Name

Unable to prevail against his heavenly opponent, Jacob still hung on tenaciously to the ‘man’ with whom he was engaged in combat. Finally, the angel said “‘let me go, for the dawn is breaking.’ But he [Jacob] said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’” (v. 26). Scripture is silent as to why the angel wanted to be released before the sun rose. Again, some skeptical scholars point to the idea that this being may have been some nocturnal demon who lost his powers at daybreak, but such interpretations are inconsistent with the rest of the narrative.

It may simply have been that the angel was concerned that Jacob would better be able to recognize him as an angel in the coming daylight. We know from the past that Jacob could spend the night with someone without recognizing who they were (Genesis 29:25). But we also can infer that Jacob may have begun to sense that this ‘man’ was something more. After all, Jacob had recently encountered angelic visitors (Genesis 32:1-2). At the very least, Jacob’s question implied that he understood that the being with whom he wrestled was both his superior and capable of rendering him a blessing.

Thus, Jacob hoped to receive from God’s messenger a blessing beyond that which he had stolen from Esau. To be sure, Jacob had already been blessed by God in the sense of His promises, protection, and presence (Genesis 28:13-15). Jacob had also received worldly blessings from the Lord (Genesis 30:30). But Jacob, it seemed, wanted the personal blessing of this angelic visitor. Scripture does not say specifically what that blessing entailed. But we can infer that it may have been some sense of promise regarding his future encounter with Esau.

In response, “he [the angel] said to him, ‘what is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob’” (v. 27). There is, of course, no reason to conclude that this question was asked out of ignorance. God, and His angels, often asked such rhetorical questions to draw out a particular sense of understanding from the person being asked. Perhaps the most famous example was when “the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘where are you?’” (Genesis 3:9). God’s question then had nothing to do with the physical location of Adam, but rather was to compel Adam to face the fact that he was hiding from God because of his sin.

The point here was that the angel wanted Jacob to acknowledge who he was and that his name, “the one who supplants,” suited him perfectly. ²⁵“Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob. . . . “Then he [Esau] said, ‘is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing’” (Genesis 25:25-26; 27:36). Thus, Jacob needed to admit the accuracy of his old name, before he could be given a new name.

And having stated his name, the new appellation was bestowed. “He said, ‘your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed’” (v. 28). The formula for the renaming here is consistent with the pattern used for Abraham.

“No longer shall your name be called Abram,
But your name shall be Abraham;
For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5).

The name, itself, literally meant “let *El* rule” and, as such, it marked a great transition in Jacob’s life. Until now, Jacob’s career might have been characterized as *IsraJacob*, “let Jacob rule.” After all, he had emerged victorious in every previous confrontation - with Esau, with Isaac, and with Laban. And now, he had even held his own against the angel. But notice that Jacob did not repent of his given name. He simply acknowledged it, he did not apologize for the fact that its characterization of him had proved true.

Now having been given a new name, Jacob wanted to know the name of the person with whom he had struggled throughout the night. “Then Jacob asked him and said, ‘please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘why is it that you ask my name?’ And he blessed him there” (v. 29). The language indicates that the angel demanded the name of Jacob, whereas Jacob politely inquired as to the name of the angel, again showing the difference in rank between the two combatants. And so the angel responded with a question of his own. Again, such a pattern is similar to other accounts of men confronting angels. “¹⁷Manoah said to the angel of the Lord, ‘what is your name, so that when your words come to pass, we may honor you?’¹⁸But the angel of the Lord said to him, ‘why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?’” (Judges 13:17-18).

The angel’s response was as if to say “Jacob, don’t you know who I am?” And Jacob, silently admitting the truth of the situation, had not further response to the angel. It was left to the narrator to record the remainder of the encounter. “So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved’” (v. 30). As was so often the case, the mortal only recognized the presence of the divinity after the divinity either at the very end of their encounter or after the divinity had departed.

“²¹Then the angel of the Lord put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. ²²When Gideon saw that he was the angel of the Lord, he said, ‘alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face’” (Judges 6:21-22).

“Now the angel of the Lord did not appear to Manoah or his wife again. Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lordm(Judges 13:21).

“³⁰When He had reclined at the table with them, He took the bread and blessed it, and breaking it, He began giving it to them. ³¹Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; and He vanished from their sight” (Luke 24:30-31).

Only at the end of their meeting, then, did Jacob recognize that he had sent the night wrestling with an angel.

That his life had been saved despite his encounter with the divine was again an act of God’s grace and some scholars have suggested that this is evidence that this was an angel, and not the Lord, Himself. God would one day tell Moses, “you cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exodus 33:20). Yet, there is no reason to presume that prescription was in effect for the patriarchs, as we can recall from

Abraham's negotiation with God over the lives in Sodom (Genesis 18:22-32). And we must remember that Adam walked with God (Genesis 3).

The name Peniel literally means "the face of God." But further evidence that this was an angel of God is indicated by Hosea,

³In the womb he took his brother by the heel,
And in his maturity he contended with God.
⁴Yes, he wrestled with the angel and prevailed;
He wept and sought His favor.
He found Him at Bethel
And there He spoke with us" (Hosea 12:3-5).

This is more consistent with the theophanies during the lives of the patriarchs.

Hagar - "Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur" (Genesis 16:7).

Lot - "Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground" (Genesis 19:1).

Abraham "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "here I am" (Genesis 22:11).

Jacob "He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Genesis 28:12).

So it seems that the best textual and contextual evidence indicates that this was an angel of the Lord, and not Yahweh, Himself.

Personal Growth

Jacob's survival of the encounter certainly emboldened him to face Esau. That Jacob recognized that he had been preserved, rather than that he had been victorious, was personal growth. And yet, Jacob did not leave the encounter entirely unharmed. ³¹Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh. ³²Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip" (v. 31-32). Jacob, thus, had a new name and a new limp. Curiously, such a defect would have made Jacob ceremonially unclean according to later Mosaic law, "For no one who has a defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man, or he who has a disfigured face, or any deformed limb" (Leviticus 21:18).

As a side note, for it is mentioned almost parenthetically in the text, the new limp also served as an etiology for the dietary practices of the Israelites, though this was clearly less important than the name change, as we will see in the future.

Takeaways

This passage has created difficulty for interpreters throughout the ages. The Christian philosopher Philo read the narrative allegorically, and argued that its meaning lay in the understanding of the human soul overcoming human passion and wickedness. Augustine saw the angel as a type of Christ. What we can see is that at the original meeting between Jacob and God, God had offered promises. Now, at this encounter, God began the last installment in the fulfilling of those promises.

We will also see in future passages that Jacob was completing his evolution from being an able trickster to a humble servant. He was finally learning to rely upon God rather than upon his own cunning. For us today, we can thankfully remember that the God Who worked in Jacob is the same God Who works in us,

“That He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus”
(Philippians 1:6).

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).