



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Jacob Becomes Israel

Genesis 32.22–32

Preliminaries

1. We continue the three-part account of Jacob's return to Canaan and reunion with Esau.
 - a. Jacob prepares to meet Esau (32.1–21).
 - b. Jacob's name is changed to Israel (32.22–32).
 - c. Esau and Jacob are reconciled (33.1–17) (Lang, Ward, and Nelson 2015).
2. Overview of direction and word of caution re: vv. 22–32.
 - a. Jacob is anticipating a meeting with Esau, but first finds himself “meeting” a threatening stranger.
 - b. “The encounter of 32:22–32 is perhaps the most extensively interpreted text in the patriarchal materials. Its rich expository possibility is based in part on its lack of clarity, which permits various readings. In any case, it is an ominous encounter with an unnamed opponent possessing divine qualities” (Brueggemann 1982, 266).¹
3. Unlike chapter 28, this is not a vision or dream; nor is it merely symbolic of an inner struggle. This is real hand-to-hand combat. Hard to understand, but don't make it more than it is (Willis 1979, 357).

Unraveling a Puzzling Text

4. Verse 22 is a summary/overview statement for the account that formally begins in verse 23.
 - a. “Children” (ESV) is better translated “sons” (NIV, KJV, NLKV, NET).
 - 1) The Hebrew term used here is יָלֵד (yeled) which typically describes male offspring.
 - 2) “Children” is problematic because “eleven” does not account for Dinah (born Gen 30.21) (Benjamin is the 12th son and 13th child, born later; Gen 35.16–19). (NET Bible Notes 2019).
 - b. Setting is the Jabbok River which flows into the Jordan from the east, about twenty-five miles above the Dead Sea
5. Jacob, alone on the north side of the Jabbok (v. 23), encounters “a man [who] wrestled with him until the breaking of the day” (v. 24).
 - a. The wrestling is hardly described; we know only that it lasted all night (and Jacob is 97 years old!!)

¹ There is a danger in exposition that derives from “various readings,” illustrated in the unflattering comment made about the presentations of some preachers: “he went everywhere preaching the word.” We should always keep in mind the basic rule of interpretation that “a text cannot mean [now] what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers [then]” (Fee and Stuart, 2003, 74.) While there are passages where precise meanings cannot be ascertained, we should always seek to stay true to the possible meanings within Scripture's historical and literary context, and always with the understanding that exegesis must precede application.

and that Jacob held his own.²

6. Jacob's foe: the "man" who did not prevail (vv. 24–25).
 - a. In what is likely a reflection of Jacob's perspective at the outset, the author calls Jacob's opponent simply "a man" (יִשׁׁ, *iyš*).
 - b. At daybreak, the stranger seeks to leave.
 - 1) Because he might lose his power (an idea which fits with some of the mythological interpretations that have been proposed; cf. Walton 2009, 116)?
 - 2) Or to maintain his hiddenness?
 - c. The text doesn't say; it does say that the mysterious "man" and Jacob fought to a draw.
 - 1) It ends with an injury to Jacob's hip (v. 25).
 - a) The Hebrew verb "touched" ("struck" in NET; נָגַח, *nāga*) has the primary meanings, "to touch, to reach, to strike," but can connote "to harm; to molest; to injure" (NET Notes 2019).
 - 2) If God, what kind of God who can be pressed to a draw by a man?
 - 3) "And what kind of man is our father Jacob that he can force a draw, even against heaven?"
 - d. "This is no ordinary man. And certainly no ordinary God! Clearly, this is no ordinary story" (Bruggemann 1982, 267).
7. Verses 26–29
 - a. Note the dialogue in vv. 26–29.
 - 1) **Man:** "let me go; the day is breaking." **Jacob:** "Not unless you *bless* me" (v. 26).
 - 2) **Man:** "What is your *name*?" **Jacob:** "Jacob." **Man:** "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; you have fought with God and men and prevailed" (vv. 27–28).
 - 3) **Jacob:** "Please tell me your *name*." **Man:** "Why do you ask my name?" Then he **blessed** him (v. 29).
 - b. Observations.
 - 1) **First**, Jacob is presented as the stronger party, knowing he possesses the advantage; so he seeks a blessing—a request at first ignored (v. 26).
 - 2) **Second**, the stranger has the stronger part and gives Jacob a new name and identity (vv. 27–28).
 - a) Once: Jacob: "heel/trickster/over-reacher/supplanter." None is flattering. Now: Israel, the one who has striven with God and prevailed.
 - b) This links the man and later the community to both the attacker of the night and promise-keeper of the day.
 - c) Israel is something new in the world: faced God, was stricken by God, prevailed, gained blessing, and was renamed.
 - 3) **Third**, notice Jacob's audacity. He asks for the stranger's name, *God's* name, "the mystery of heaven and earth." He gets the blessing, but the stranger remains inscrutable.
 - a) "God remains God, his hiddenness intact. But Jacob is no longer Jacob. Now he is Israel" (Bruggemann 1982, 269).

² Jacob's age at this point in the narrative is calculated by working backward from the fact that he was 130 when he died (Gen 47.9). Joseph was 30 when he began his advisory role with Pharaoh (41.46), and Jacob entered Egypt 9 years after Joseph became the vizier (based on the facts that there had been seven years of plenty followed by two years of famine before Israel went to Egypt; 45.6, 11). Thus, Joseph was 39 when he introduced Jacob to Pharaoh. Subtracting 30 from 130 means that Jacob was 91 when Joseph was born; subtracting the fourteen years Jacob served Laban before Joseph was born (30.25) means that he was 77 when he went to Haran. (For the specifics of the prior analysis, I am indebted to a presentation and slide by Dale Manor in a prior meeting of the Berea Class.)

Adding the 14 years of service for his wives, plus the additional 6 years he served after that initial service (31.41) means that Jacob was 97 when he returned from Haran to Canaan.

8. Verses 28–29 – about that name:
- The name “Israel” is a common construction, using a verb with a theophoric element (לָחַם, *ʿel*) that usually indicates the subject of the verb. Here, it means “God fights.”
 - “Israel” will replace the name Jacob; it will be both a promise and a call for faith. In essence, the LORD says that Jacob would have victory and receive the promises because God would fight for him.³
 - As with Abraham and Sarah (17.5, 15), the divine name change symbolizes a change in Jacob’s character. “The cunning Jacob becomes the divinely commissioned Israel” (Maly, “Genesis,” 34; in Willis 1979, 358).
9. Verses 30–31.
- The name “Peniel” (פְּנֵי־אֵל, *pʿniyʿēl*) means “face of God.” Since Jacob saw God *face-to-face* here, the name is appropriate (“Penuel” in v. 31 is apparently a variant spelling of the same name.)
 - Jacob’s life preserved
 - Verse 30 affirms that Jacob has, in some sense at least, seen God; not completely as he is (cf. John 1.18), but in an experience that lets him know he has been dealing with God himself and not a mere man or even an angel (Willis 1979, 358).
 - “My life has been delivered” (“survived”) (נָצַל, *nāṣal*). Possible double meaning:
 - I saw God and still live.
 - I saw God and my safety is assured.
10. The sinew of the hip: the only place in the OT where this eating custom is mentioned (Willis 1979, 359).

Theological principles

11. A bigger view of God (cf. J. B. Phillips; Rick Oster on Revelation 1).
- If this is Yahweh, we see something other than the promise-filled aspect known in the daylight; this is a more terrifying picture, not to be trifled with.
12. Two changes for Jacob.
- Has a *new name*: this is not about a personal encounter with God; it’s about the formation of Israel.
 - Decisively changed by a *new limp*, a crippling injury: the new name cannot be separated from the new limp. Israel has been humbled.
13. Israel’s crippling victory.
- Israel’s origin story is its ongoing story: grace, accompanied by humility (cf. Deut 7.6ff., 17ff.; 8.11ff.; 9.1ff.).
 - Always begins and ends with seeing/knowing God.
 - But always with a more complete picture of God than is sometimes emphasized.
 - Israel will reach great heights and be protected as God promises; but only as Israel remains humble.
 - Seeing God will never leave us the same, and certainly not unscathed. Jacob lived, but in a new way, with new power, and also new weakness. But he was prepared now to face his brother.

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Works Cited

Walter Brueggemann. 1982. *Genesis*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. John Knox Press.

³ In the Hebrew text, there is a sound play here: “You have fought” translates (סָרַיתָ, *sarita*) which sounds like the name “Israel” (יִשְׂרָאֵל, *yisraʿel*), meaning “God fights” (although some interpret the meaning as “he fights [with] God”) (NET Notes 2019).

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