



Genesis - Chapter Thirty Two

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.b Genesis 25:19-36:43 - Isaac's Descendants (continues)

II.b.xiii Genesis 31:22-32:2 - Laban Accuses Jacob in Gilead (continues/concludes)

II.b.xiii.2 Genesis 31:43-32:2 - Laban and Jacob Make a Covenant (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Two

Having left Laban behind, Jacob continues his journey back to Canaan and knows that he must encounter his brother Esau. In preparation for their reunion, Jacob sends ahead a messenger to tell of his approach.

When the messenger returns to tell Jacob that Esau is on his way to meet with him, Jacob becomes afraid and arranges for his servants to take three separate gifts of livestock on ahead of him to present to Esau as each group encounters him. Jacob and his family remained behind.

That night Jacob sent his family and their possession across the River Jabbok but he remained on the other side of the river. During the night, Jacob wrestled with a man who did not prevail against him but did dislocate Jacob's hip to end the encounter. However, Jacob would not let the man go until he had received a blessing from him. The man was God and he renamed Jacob to Israel. Thus Jacob renamed the place Peniel, which means 'the face of God.'

¹ Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; ² and when Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's camp!' So he called that place Mahanaim.

Genesis 32:1-2

These two verses provide an interesting, if somewhat enigmatic, interlude between Jacob's encounters with Laban and Esau. The reference to the angels of God is reminiscent of Jacob's dream at Bethel (28:12), the only other place in the whole of the OT where this same expression is used. The presence of God's angels in this context would be a sign of protection, as in: <<*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them*>> (Psalm 34:7), <<*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways*>> (Psalm 91:11), and: <<*My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong*>> (Daniel 6:22).

Similarly, Jacob's observation: this is God's camp, parallels his previous comment about Bethel as being <<*the house of God*>> (28:17). Since camps were mobile, unlike houses, Jacob's remark suggests that God has sent his angels to accompany Jacob safely back to the land of Canaan.

Mahanaim means two camps or companies, possibly alluding to God's camp and Jacob's camp; the motif of 'two companies' reappears in v.7 and v.10.

II.b.xiv Genesis 32:3-21 - Jacob Sends Presents to Appease Esau

After separating peacefully from Laban, Jacob prepares to meet his estranged brother Esau. Jacob is naturally hesitant about how he will be received some twenty years after fleeing from Esau in order to avoid being killed by him. Jacob's preparations are intended to promote a peaceful reconciliation.

³ Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴ instructing them, 'Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, "I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; ⁵ and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favour in your sight."'"

Genesis 32:3-5

Jacob sent messengers before him. The Hebrew term for messengers, *mal'ak*, denotes angels in v.1.

I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves. Jacob was not simply boasting. He wanted Esau to know that he was a man of wealth and that he did not come to take anything from Esau. Jacob tried to anticipate Esau's thinking and answer Esau's concerns.

In the land of Seir, the country of Edom. This region lies to the east of Canaan in Transjordan. According to 36:6-8, Esau settled here after Jacob returned to Canaan. Esau was obviously drawn to this region before Jacob returned and may have already separated himself from his father Isaac, who was living at Mamre, near Hebron (35:27). Seir, Hebrew Se'ir, recalls hairy, Hebrew Sa'ir, and Edom, Hebrew 'Edom, recalls red, Hebrew 'admoni, from 25:25.

The tone of Jacob's message to Esau is very deferential. Twice describing Esau as my lord, Jacob wants to find favour in his brother's sight, refer to the comment made on v.18.

⁶ The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, 'We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.'

Genesis 32:6

Four hundred men with him. A force of this size suggests that Esau plans to attack Jacob. Genesis Chapter Fourteen recounts how Abraham, with a force of 318 men, successfully went to battle against four kings. Jacob's group could not hope to prevail against such a force.

⁷ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, ⁸ thinking, 'If Esau comes to one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.'

Genesis 32:7-8

Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. Before Jacob left home, after his brother swore to kill him, Rebekah told Jacob: <<*until your brother's anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there*>> (Genesis 27:45a). Rebekah never sent for Jacob; therefore he had every reason to believe that Esau was still angry with him twenty years later. However, Jacob also had every reason to believe God would protect him. He seems to have forgotten God had a special camp of angels there to protect him. His great fear and distress is not appropriate for someone who is protected by God. Jacob should have said, "I don't know if Esau is coming to me in peace or in war. I hope for peace, but if it is war, I trust God will protect me."

Out of fear of Esau, Jacob divided his family, servants, livestock and possessions into two companies or camps. Jacob's actions, while understandable from a human perspective, reflect his inability to trust God fully for protection. The motif of two companies or camps, however, has already been introduced in vv.1-2 with reference to God's protective presence.

⁹ And Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, “Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good”, ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹ Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. ¹² Yet you have said, “I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.”’

Genesis 32:9-12

Jacob said. After first reacting in fear and unbelief, Jacob did the right thing. He went to the Lord and prayed a humble prayer full of faith, thanksgiving, and with reflection on God’s promises.

I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness. Jacob’s prayer, prompted by fear of Esau, expresses deep gratitude to God and a humble recognition that Jacob is unworthy of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness: <<*The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’*>> (Exodus 34:6). Ironically, because God has prospered him so abundantly, Jacob is able to divide everything that he has into two companies. Once again the motif of two companies is picked up; refer again to vv.1-2.

O LORD. This is the first time Jacob addresses God using his special name Yahweh, translated here LORD; refer to the comment made on 2:4.

Deliver me, please shows that his prayer had faith. He boldly asked God to do something, and gave humble grounds for why the Lord should fulfil his word.

Make your offspring as the sand of the sea. This is a promise of God that both the nation of Israel shall be great in number: <<*Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people’, it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God’*>> (Hosea 1:10), <<*And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, ‘Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved’*>> (Romans 9:27). Paul makes it clear that this also applies to the church as the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Genesis, however, does not specify when this divine promise was made to Jacob. At Bethel God speaks of Jacob’s offspring being like <<*the dust of the earth*>> (28:14), just as he had said to Abraham

(13:16). On another occasion God could have compared Jacob's descendants to the sand of the sea, for he also uses this image in his oath to Abraham (22:17).

¹³ So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, ¹⁵ thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. ¹⁶ These he delivered into the hand of his servants, each drove by itself, and said to his servants, 'Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove.' ¹⁷ He instructed the foremost, 'When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, "To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?"' ¹⁸ then you shall say, "They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.'" ¹⁹ He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, 'You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, ²⁰ and you shall say, "Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.' ²¹ So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

Genesis 32:13-21

He took a present for his brother Esau. To demonstrate his goodwill, Jacob sends Esau various droves of animals as a present, for: <<*A gift opens doors; it gives access to the great*>> (Proverbs 18:16). The giving of gifts was common in the culture: <<*Then Saul replied to the boy, 'But if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What have we?'*>> (1 Samuel 9:7), <<*the king said to Hazael, 'Take a present with you and go to meet the man of God. Inquire of the LORD through him, whether I shall recover from this illness'*>> (2 Kings 8:8), and: <<*So the captain of the guard gave him an allowance of food and a present, and let him go*>> (Jeremiah 40:5b).

Your servant Jacob; my lord Esau. Jacob's deferential attitude is noteworthy, given earlier statements about the older serving the younger (25:23) and Isaac's blessing, which speaks of Jacob's being lord over his brothers (27:29).

I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me. In all likelihood, Jacob is a perfect example of the principle "when all else fails, pray." As soon as he finished praying,

he took up his own strategies again. George Mueller, a great man of faith and prayer, was once asked what the most important part of prayer was. He replied: “The 15 minutes after I have said, ‘Amen.’” No matter how great Jacob’s prayer was, his faith will be seen in what he does after his prayer.

So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp. Had Jacob truly trusted in God’s protection then he would have advanced at the vanguard of his group. He may have been fearful but he should still have trusted that God would keep his promises to him.

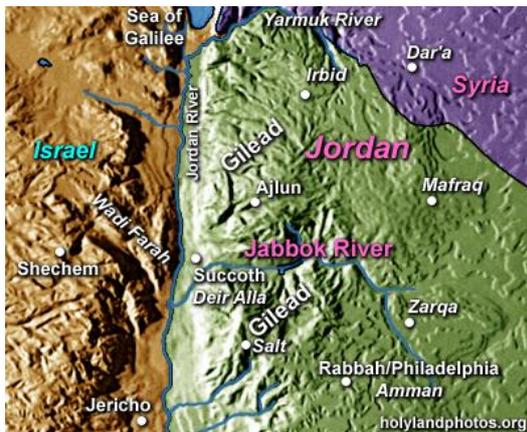
II.b.xv Genesis 32:22-32 - Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

This passage records a night time encounter between God and Jacob. Jacob is transformed by this extraordinary meeting, which is marked by the changing of his name from Jacob to Israel.

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Genesis 32:22-23

The ford of the Jabbok. Jacob’s journey has brought him to the Jabbok River, which flows westward into the Jordan Valley about 24 miles or 39 km north of the Dead Sea. See the images.



²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

Genesis 32:24

It was important that Jacob was left alone for the encounter that was about to take place. Daniel, too, was alone at an important time: <<*So I was left alone to see this great vision. My strength left me, and my complexion grew deathly pale, and I retained no strength*>> (Daniel 10:8).

A man wrestled with him until daybreak. The unexpected and sudden introduction of this man, who wrestles in the dark with Jacob, captures something of the event itself. By the time their contest comes to an end, Jacob is convinced that his opponent is God himself (v.30). This is not improbable, given that God had previously come to Abraham in human form (18:1-15). The story contains an interesting wordplay in Hebrew: God wrestles (*ye'abeq*) with Jacob (*ya'aqob*) by the Jabbok (*yabboq*).

²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Genesis 32:25

Jacob's hip was put out of joint. Jacob's injury highlights not only the strength of his opponent but also his own resolve to prevail.

²⁶ Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'

Genesis 32:26

I will not let you go, unless you bless me. Jacob's determination to be blessed is demonstrated by his reluctance to release his opponent, even when his thigh is dislocated.

²⁷ So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.'²⁸ Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'

Genesis 32:27-28

You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel. From the context, Israel is probably to be understood as meaning 'he strives with God'; the alternative meaning is 'God strives', but the context makes this less likely. Hosea 12:3-4 reflects on this event: <<*In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favour; he met him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him*>>. The renaming of Jacob brings to a climax a lifetime of struggling with others (25:22). Through all this, Jacob has finally come to realise the importance of being blessed by God. The events of the preceding years have changed Jacob. The God of his father has now become his God.

This is the first mention of the name Israel in the Bible. In extra-biblical literature, it first appears in the 'Israel Stele' of Pharaoh Merneptah of the late 13th Century BC. The text says: 'Israel lies desolate; its seed is no more.'

Obviously by this early date the name was being used for a people and not merely for an individual.

²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him.

Genesis 32:29

Why is it that you ask my name? The man does not reveal his name for he apparently believes that Jacob should know who it is he is struggling with.

And there he blessed him. Details of the blessing are not revealed. As the blessing follows his renaming to Israel, it is likely that it refers more to the succession of Abraham’s promises passing on to him and his descendants rather than a blessing of protection in his immediate circumstances.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Genesis 32:30-32

Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ Peniel means ‘face of God.’ Jacob’s encounter with God fills him with awe. When later Moses asks to see God’s glory, he is told: <<**you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live**>> (Exodus 33:20). In light of this, either Jacob’s encounter is a remarkable exception or, alternatively, the expression ‘face to face’ should be understood as a figure of speech for intimacy with God. In Exodus 33:11, God speaks to Moses ‘face to face,’ but in both cases the phrase can imply a close personal encounter, or possibly a vision of the brightness of God’s glory, without suggesting a literal vision of God’s face.

Paul, however, envisions a time of meeting with God face to face: <<For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known>> (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Jewish tradition speaks of Jacob having a permanent limp to remind him always of this encounter with God. Penuel is a variant spelling of Peniel.

There are theologians and commentators who take this encounter with God to be one of several theophanies of the pre-incarnate Christ.