The Identity of Jacob's Opponent: Wrestling with Ambiguity in Genesis 32:22-32

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> *In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favor (Hosea 12:3-4).*

WHO IS THE "MAN" JACOB WRESTLES at the ford of the Jabbok? Critical exegesis has traditionally identified him as an angel, with reliance upon ample evidence in the text: he appears out of nowhere and just as mysteriously disappears; he dislocates Jacob's hip at a touch; and Jacob himself, at the end of the episode, identifies his opponent as divine: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30).[1] Then why is this angel called a "man" not once but throughout the entire narrated part of the passage? Even what Jacob calls "the face of God" proves less clear than one might first expect. Before the wrestling match at night, Jacob in the larger narrative anticipates seeing the face of his brother Esau whom he has cheated of birthright and blessing. When Jacob actually encounters Esau the next morning, his response echoes the exclamation quoted above: "to see your face is like seeing the face of

1. All textual references cited are from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

God, with such favor have you received me" (33:10). Doubtless the opponent at the Jabbok has shaped Jacob's conception of his brother; but on a closer reading, the text seems also to suggest that the man at the river has himself *been shaped* by Jacob's prior apprehension about meeting Esau.

In order to identify and understand Jacob's opponent, attention must be paid both to the passage at hand and to the larger narrative it interrupts. As I hope I have already shown, the placement of the conflict in a chapter otherwise dedicated to the reunion of the brothers is not accidental, the work of a clumsy redactor patching together unrelated tales. If the inclusion of verses 22-32 disrupts the narrative flow, the disruption is purposeful, calculated to create a fuller awareness of Jacob's relations with both Esau and God. Likewise, if the verses themselves appear confusing (how can the man both foreshadow Esau and manifest the divine?), this confusion could be intentional, a *fusion* of separate personalities drawn from the larger narrative. However connected to the rest of the Jacob cycle, verses 22-32 will be our proper focus of study; references to other parts of Genesis will be made insofar as they relate to the conflict at the river.

Our passage begins with difficulties. Significant on their own, these difficulties also anticipate the more resonant ambiguities to come:

> 22. The same night he arose 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.

In his reading of the passage, Roland Barthes has pointed out that it is unclear which side of the river Jacob is on at the end of verse 23.[2] Verse 22, he argues, reads as though Jacob crosses together with his family and possessions, while verse 23 leads one to think that he remains behind. For Barthes, the verse 23 reading casts the passage in a "folkloric" light in which Jacob must confront and overcome the mythological guardian of the river before crossing; the verse 22 reading depicts Jacob as the patriarch who has already crossed over, transforming the scene that follows into the isolation of the chosen hero as he struggles with his call (cf. Ex. 4:24-26). The two scenarios, each supported by its own verse and offering a different image of Jacob, may also be read as episodes of one action: first Jacob goes or begins to go over with his family, then he returns or stays on the other side. In this unified reading, there are not alternative Jacobs but one who is reluctant, torn, so to speak, by the separate verses. Given the chronology, verse 23 decides where the indecisive Jacob ends up.

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2. "The Struggle with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32:22-32," reprinted in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 125-41.

Such reluctance on Jacob's part accords nicely with what has preceded. Throughout 32:1-21 he seeks to divert the danger posed by Esau and his four hundred men. To do so, he divides his company into two camps, sends ahead gifts and servants to placate his brother, and prays to God for protection. Alongside the fear of Esau is perhaps the more general anxiety of returning home, of having to fulfill the vow he made to God in 28:20-22, pending his safe deliverance out of Mesopotamia. His precautions would seem complete by 32:21: "So the present passed on before him; and he himself lodged that night in camp." Verses 22-23, however, continue Jacob's division of camps to the point of his complete isolation: now not only is he free of servants and cattle, but also of family and possessions. Everything stands between him and Esau. On either side, the river has a name (the Jabbok) and a divisive geography which fit Jacob and his predicament. At the end of verse 23, he is truly his own camp: "he himself." The next verse confirms and contradicts this isolation:

> 24. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

The verse begins by reiterating what we as readers have already known; but suddenly it turns a pirouette and plants us in the midst of a struggle that lasts until dawn. The effect is jarring. Some readers may wish to attribute this abrupt shift to the terse nature of biblical narrative and its frequent inattention to clear transitional devices. In Jacob's other encounters with divine beings, however, the narrative clearly states the advent and nature of the visitation. In 32:1-2, for example, Jacob comes across angels on his way toward Esau: "Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, 'This is God's army!'" The narrative indicates the moment of meeting and identifies the visitors as angels; and Jacob's response confirms this identification. Aside from the ambiguous naming of "Mahanaim" ("two camps"), the events of this short passage are clear. Why does our much longer passage flout clarity? Why are we not told that the man first *met* Jacob before wrestling him; or if the stranger is in fact an angel, why doesn't he at least "appear," as in other passages? The biblical hallmark of "behold" is also missing. We are only told that Jacob is alone, and then suddenly he is wrestling.

Or perhaps he is alone *and* wrestling. Packed into one sentence, the isolation of verse 24a is confused with the struggle of verse 24b, which does not so much contradict as comment on the first half. Only in this reading of the verse can we adequately explain the emphasis on Jacob's isolation and the lack of any clear transition to the struggle. If actually alone, he can only be wrestling himself or a figment of his thoughts made physical—someone remembered from his past or anticipated in his future. In either case, the

wrestling match would be an externalized struggle with the psyche. We have come a long way from the "folkloric" angle mentioned earlier; in a peculiar way, however, that angle supports a psychological explanation of verse 24. As mythological guardian of the river, the man is properly linked to that river, whose name "Jabbok" bears a striking similarity to the name of Jacob. Striking, too, is the phonetic similarity of the patriarch's name to the Hebrew verb "to wrestle."[3] So even though the opponent remains unidentified, we know that he wrestles (Hebrew *ye'abeq*) with Jacob at the ford of the Jabbok.

We also know, with our eye now turned to the larger narrative, that Jacob acquired his name (translated literally "heel-grabber") in the struggle at birth with Esau and that his thoughts on the night of the river conflict are revolving around his brother. If phonetically speaking Jacob is at the appropriate place involved in the activity appropriate to his name, thematically speaking whom else but Esau would Jacob wrestle? In the twenty-one verses preceding our passage, Jacob has stalled and evaded the inevitable meeting with his brother: this is what he fears. What worse nightmare could Jacob have than an Esau turned demonically strong? And just as the abrupt introduction to the struggle might reflect Jacob's ever-present fears of what will transpire the next morning, the setting and circumstances of the struggle could hark back to how the two brothers began their rivalry. The rushing water of the Jabbok, the darkness, the length of the struggle, and almost symbiotic conflation of the contestants all suggest a return to that first struggle in the womb. Traditional exegesis must look to other verses for proof of the man being an angel.

Verse 25 at first glance seems to provide such proof. On closer inspection, however, it spins an ambiguous turn like verse 24:

> 25. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

In verse 25a the struggle appears evenly matched, as suggested by its long duration in verse 24. It is not until verse 25b that the seemingly innocuous touch on Jacob's thigh proves to have dislocated the joint, and we realize that the man, however powerful, has resorted to this stroke because their strength was evenly matched. How can the man both wield this unearthly power and be vulnerable enough to need it? The last part of verse 25b sheds little light on this question but rather adds to the mystery: "he wrestled with him." Who is the subject, and who the object? There is

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3. See Jan P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 210.

no answer to this question. Both men are locked in a struggle that has lasted for hours and will continue until dawn. The floating pronouns here and elsewhere in the passage resemble the elusive and variously allusive words of the divine prophecy delivered to Rebekah while the twins struggled in her womb:

> Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger (25:23).

The "one" of the third line could refer to either of the sons, and although the "elder" must refer to Esau and his nation, which will grow in the shadow of Israel, it is Jacob who calls himself "servant" and Esau "lord" throughout chapters 32 and 33. Even where the descriptive labels and pronouns have more certain reference, readers must disentangle the options to find the one that best fits the context. Looking at the passage for the first time, one might even be unsure who is requesting release from whom as the dawn begins to break. What of the wound itself? Is there any significance in its location and severity? The last verse of our passage offers an etiology:

> 32. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh on the sinew of the hip.

Though it is impossible to say whether this taboo originated with the oral roots of our passage, the etiology occasions the first biblical use of the term "Israelites," following Jacob's own renaming. We will examine the particulars of the new name later. For now it is enough to say that this event is another momentous social distinction in Genesis, a book whose scope, beginning with a broad-canvas cosmogony and an ethnogony, gradually sharpens its focus to the origins of Israel and its relation to God. The taboo, we are told, is observed only by the Israelites; it has much the same character as a covenantal sign, a marker that commemorates a decisive point in the people's history and serves in the present to establish a sense of identity. Such a moment in history is Jacob's struggle: the outcome is a blessing diffused through him into the people and a name to identify both the patriarch and his descendants. Curiously, the Hebrew word for thigh (*yarek*) occurs in only two other Genesis passages: 24:2, where Abraham commands his servant to find a wife for Isaac outside of Canaan; and 47:29, where Jacob himself (now named Israel) commands his own son Joseph to bury him outside of Egypt. Both times the word occurs in instances of swearing, that is, in covenants involving questions of the homeland and

ultimately the future of the people. By touching the patriarch under his thigh, both Abraham's servant and Joseph are bound in oath.

In the next verse of our passage Jacob gains mastery over his opponent and makes his own demands:

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

Directly following the blow to Jacob, this plea for freedom sounds peculiar. Having met his match in verse 25a, the man dislocates Jacob's thigh only to be disabled himself. The reader's expectations have never had time to settle since the first verse: called consistently a "man," Jacob's opponent exhibits traits both divine and human, the strength to crush skin and bone with a touch and the weakness to beg for mercy in Jacob's arms. Although scholarly exegesis has rightly pointed out that the man's fear of the rising sun testifies to his original identity as a guardian spirit, the passage's roots in folklore are less crucial than its current shape and placement in Genesis. What started as a primitive tale about a river guardian developed over time into an account of how a nation's namesake acquired his title, blessing, and re-entry into the promised land. The man's fear must be explained, if it can be explained at all, within the narrative context of the passage.

If in fact there is a connection to the covenantal gestures of Abraham's servant and Joseph, Jacob's wound could be a parody of the other signs, a nightmare inversion appropriate to the struggle through the night. Ostensibly intended by the man as a blow, it only serves to prove Jacob's own prowess. But the touch could also be genuinely contractual, as suggested by what follows in verse 26. Not only does the man submit to Jacob, but his plea recalls another addressed to the patriarch. In 25:30 a starving Esau begs Jacob for food: "Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!" The speech of the man in 32:27 ("Let me go, for the day is breaking") neatly matches that of Esau in syntax and signifies a similar entreaty to Jacob. In each case he exacts a price: from Esau his birthright (*bekhorah*), and from the man a blessing (*berakhah*). We have come back to the same questions that we asked before. Could the struggle at the river be a dramatic reenactment of Jacob's memory? Is the voice of the man really Esau's, frightfully transformed but still resounding with that first request? The text remains ambiguous. How, for example, could Jacob's thigh be dislocated in a nightmare? And if the man is Esau, why is he not indicated as such? The opponent's sole designation as a "man" belies identification with either God or Esau. We can only say that verse 26 catches an echo of the earlier scene.

Verse 27 catches another such echo, this time of Jacob's theft of Esau's blessing:

And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

Instead of granting the blessing, the man asks Jacob his name. Gradually, the advantage has shifted from one wrestler to the other, so that now the man would appear to have the upper hand. His inquiry into Jacob's identity suggests less desperation than consideration. It implies the possibility of choice, and by extension, the option of withholding the blessing. The man's fear of the rising sun, Jacob's hold on him, and the other details of the struggle recede into the darkness as the wrestlers begin to speak. In the light of verse 27, Jacob's request/demand to be blessed in verse 26 sounds more audacious than exacting. Stated as a conditional, it is obscured by the man's direct question. Jacob's identity is now at issue.

In biblical literature a name more than signifies the named; it captures the essence of that person. Jacob, for example, is known and epitomized by his first action: grabbing the heel of Esau at birth. To ask Jacob for his name in the midst of the conflict is to ask for full self-disclosure. But Jacob's terse answer not only reveals his true nature; the name also entitles the entire scene, the river *(ybq)* and wrestling *('bq)* contained in its consonants, and the grasping for a blessing implied by its popular etymology (cf. Gen. 27:36). Jacob's confession, lying at the heart of the passage, provides an internal logic for an otherwise disjointed and senseless scene. According to the lexical logic of his name, Jacob should wrestle just as he should attempt to wrest a blessing from his opponent. That he has already wrestled with Esau and stolen his blessing contextualizes Jacob's wrestling into the framework of the larger narrative. Albeit in a nightmarish setting, he reasserts by action and name what he has been all along: an upstart and insurgent in the family. We may now ask the question: in stating his name to the stranger, is Jacob also implicitly confessing how the infamous title was acquired?

The reflection of this verse on that earlier conflict enriches our understanding of what it means for Jacob to reveal his name. In chapter 27 Isaac promises to bless Esau in exchange for that son's game. Rebekah, overhearing the commission and being as partial to Jacob as Isaac is to Esau's cooking, prepares food on the sly and directs her favored son to pretend to be Esau so that he may win the blessing. Blind Isaac can only ask Jacob if he is really Esau. As we might expect, Jacob lies: "I am Esau your first-born. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that you may bless me" (27:19). Sensing something is amiss, Isaac inquires how he caught and prepared the game so quickly; and with characteristic daring, Jacob claims the favor of divine providence: "Because the Lord your God granted me success" (27:20). Readers of this scene should remember the divine prophecy delivered to Rebekah while the twins still wrestled in the womb. Is Jacob's theft of Esau's blessing fulfillment of the foretold ascendancy of the younger over the elder? More importantly, should the divine prophecy

be read simply as predictive or also as prescriptive? Is God's prophecy God's sanction?

These questions must be asked again in our passage. In striking counterpoint to the first scene, Jacob in 32:27 tells the truth, claiming the right to be blessed under his own name. Hidden by a darkness at night that is surely reminiscent of Isaac's blindness, Jacob is no longer inclined to play the role of Esau. He openly admits his name and the history of struggle implied by it, while the faceless man, asking the same question as Isaac and wrestling like Esau, appears as a montage image of the family figures involved in that history. Multiple identities for the man would be appropriate in a scene that has echoed so many others in the larger narrative, each verse superimposing over the last another image from Jacob's past life. Involved in these past struggles is God's ambiguous role in Jacob's affairs, a role no more certain for the supplanter's glib claim.

The next verse under consideration seems to culminate this reprise of the past and finish it through the man's gift to Jacob, the new name "Israel":

> 28. Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

This verse is a playground for exegetes who wish to identify the man as an angel. They point out that "Israel" literally means "God strives" or "may God strive," a definition that is played on by the explanation that follows the new name. Moreover, it is the same name which God gives or gives again to Jacob in Genesis 35:10. But the new name serves to identify the namer as much as the named.

As we have already seen, the old name Jacob was derived from the prenatal struggle with Esau. The new name Israel, derived from God's own name "*el*," effaces "Jacob" and the grasped heel of Esau which it signified. Shortly after Jacob had finagled the blessing from Isaac, Esau redefined the name of Jacob to fit the new form of his brother's aggression.

> "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" (Gen. 27:36).

In verse 28 of our passage Jacob is glorified with the name "Israel." Now the patriarch "strives" rather than "supplants." In his so-called "striving with God," Jacob does not darken the stain of his old name but rather cleanses himself of that ugly title. The new name changes him, displacing his former fears with a new self-assurance. Earlier Jacob alone had lingered at the back of his entourage in fear of Esau; now, however, Israel moves to

the front in order to be the first to meet his brother. As Israel, he transcends the fraternal struggle bound up in "Jacob."

One might approach the two names from another angle and ask how different they really are, how much the new supersedes the old. Struggling is implied in both names, regardless of the shift from the pejorative Jacob to the more stately Israel. His struggling, be it grabbing the heel of Esau or duping his father, has been the common thread stitching the various tales together. This thread, I would argue, is not cut at the conflict by the river; rather, a new twine is added in the opponent's explanation (a kind of etymological footnote) for the new name. In this footnote in verse 28b, Jacob's struggles with men are cited along with his immediate struggle with God: "... for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." The footnote's inclusion of "men" seems to suggest that "Israel" contains rather than cancels "Jacob," updates rather than effaces the older name's dependence on the heel of Esau. But how do the prior struggles with Esau and other men (e.g., Laban and even Isaac) support Jacob's new identity as "the one who strives with God?" The question would be less insistent were it not for the fact that Jacob's opponent in the narrative parts of our passage is only identified as a "man."

Readers may have forgotten the opponent's manhood, for it is only indicated in verses 24 and 25a. After that point the third person singular pronoun is used, always for the opponent and often for Jacob. Indeed, once the wrestlers begin to speak, the narrative is covered in a thicket of "he's" and "him's." These pronouns confuse the reference enough to deflect the original question about the actual identity of the man. By the time Jacob is named anew in verse 28, even readers who remember the opponent's entrance as a "man" may be inclined to think that such an introduction was merely a rhetorical device to instill suspense before the man was properly revealed as an angel. In a careful reading, however, the opponent's inclusion of men with God in verse 28b's footnote etymology should raise again the fundamental question of who or what is the "man."

Could the "man" be one of the "men" cited in the footnote etymology? In the mouth of Jacob's opponent, "God" need not be any more self-referential than "men." If only figuratively, Jacob has striven with the divine before this scene. His vow to God in 28:20-22 tests as much as it promises: in the manner of a bargain, Jacob says he will worship God in exchange for his future providence. Another instance of *striving* is Jacob's audacious claim of being divinely aided in the brisk preparation of food that wins the blessing. Might not the opponent be referring to these scenes as much as to the one now taking place at the river? Stated in the present perfect, the footnote etymology reads like an overview of Jacob's entire past, including the separate struggles with God and men. Joining the two in his explanation, perhaps the opponent himself joins *both*, God and man confused.

Though paradoxical, this reading would account for the divine and human traits exhibited by the opponent throughout our passage and also for the curiously inclusive footnote etymology of verse 28b.

When Jacob is renamed Israel in 35:10, this footnote is absent:

> And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name."

Although the second renaming appropriates most of its language from the first, it is subtly different. As Robert Alter and others have decisively argued, repetition shaded by slight changes is a common technique of biblical narrative for expressing shifts in tone and psychological perspective.[4] Though probably the result of separate traditions being spliced together, the paired renamings define one another, each one being appropriate to its setting and speaker. When God speaks, there is neither the question about the old name nor the footnote explaining the new. Both are notable omissions: the "what is your name?" question in verse 27 of our passage recalls the doddering voice of the blind Isaac inquiring about his son's identity, and the footnote in verse 28b, appended to a self-explanatory name, grants equal credit to the men and "God" Jacob has wrestled. While inappropriate in the mouth of God, asking about the old name and explaining the new befit the mixed accent of Jacob's opponent. The footnote etymology in particular may be seen as a conflation of the other scenes in which the names "Jacob" and "Israel" are explained separately. Only in verse 28b do struggles with God and men figure together. The speech of Jacob's opponent throughout the passage mixes the colloquial and magisterial, holding echoes of both the divine and human. Puzzled perhaps as much as we, Jacob asks the same question in verse 29 that we have been asking all along:

> 29. Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

In verse 27 the opponent asked about Jacob's name; now Jacob does the same. Not only are the two wrestlers evenly matched in strength, they also ask the same questions. The self-explanatory name Israel and the etymological footnote that followed were obviously insufficient for Jacob; he is still curious and uncertain about his opponent's identity. The refusal to answer may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Traditionally, it has been cited as proof of the passage's antiquity. Basic to many folktales of the time is the belief that guardian spirits such as our man may be controlled through

4. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 88-113.

a knowledge of their names. Though different, such a belief is not totally unlike the respectful silence surrounding the name YHWH. Redactors who integrated the primitive tale may have seen how the folk belief concerning names fit in a peculiar way the Hebrew cloister around the unspeakable name, and thus they decided to keep the verse. Historical considerations, however, do not suffice. When Jacob is renamed in 35:11, the divine identity of the speaker is clear: "I am God Almighty." Why does God wait until the second renaming to identify himself? Perhaps it is to clarify that the new name Israel is divinely ordained. Clarification, however, would not be necessary were it not for the fundamental mystery of Jacob's opponent. And why should God be mysterious in the first renaming and not the second?

Matters are not made clear by verse 29b. "And there he blessed him." To the best of my knowledge, biblical commentators have taken it for granted that Jacob is the one blessed. According to the grammar, Jacob is just as qualified to do the blessing as the man. We have already seen how pronouns are equivocal elsewhere in the passage. Moreover, the structural patterns of the passage would actually persuade one that Jacob is the subject of the sentence. Starting in verse 26, the verses develop in stylistic counterpoint, the subject and speaker of each new sentence alternating from wrestler to wrestler. One speaks, and the other responds. In this scheme, if there is a narrative scheme at all, Jacob would bless the man after the latter refuses to confide his name.

The objection might be raised at this point that I am simply looking for ambiguity. After all, it was Jacob who requested the blessing in verse 26. Would it not then be safe to assume that he is the one blessed? It is safe only if we isolate our passage from the larger narrative and neglect the more distant echoes. In 33:11, after the night of wrestling, Jacob offers Esau his blessing:

> "Accept, I pray you my gift [blessing] that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Thus he urged him, and he took it.

At first glance, this verse seems to confirm that Jacob was the one blessed in the earlier scene. In what better way could God "deal graciously" with him than to grant a blessing? That is the traditional reading. But if we view the struggle at night as Jacob's dream rehearsal for what transpires the next morning, the act of blessing the shadowy man comes to foreshadow the actual blessing given to Esau. In both instances Jacob speaks in the imperative with a gentle request, "I pray," followed by the gift of the blessing. In chapter 33 the language is more explicit: Jacob offers the blessing in the dialogue, which serves to clarify the narrative report of the actual offering and acceptance. Only Jacob could be the one urging. The

counterpart in our passage has no tag-word like "thus" to tip off the reader. It is essentially ambiguous. That either wrestler could bless and be blessed ramifies the sense that their struggle is evenly matched. Once Jacob requests the blessing, the man asks about his name. Jacob matches that question with one of his own. If we say that the man inquires after Jacob's identity to determine whether a blessing is in store, we must say the same of Jacob, that he questions the man to make his own determinations. We might well ask the very question posed to Jacob by the man, "why is it that you ask my name?" Of course, the question is evasive. Nevertheless, it points to what could be the central concern of the passage. Is Jacob perhaps asking the same question put to him earlier by Isaac? Is he attempting to return to Esau the blessing he won by guile? That he does so the next morning would incline us to say yes. But on this same morning he claims that God has dealt graciously with him. Whatever the ambiguity of our passage, we are equally inclined to believe that avowal as well.

In the next verses Jacob answers his own question about the identity of his opponent:

> 30. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved [delivered]." 31. The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh.

The man's departure, like his arrival, is unseen. Skeptical readers might doubt that the man was ever there, but Jacob claims that he has seen the face of God. This study began with a brief surmise about this exclamation. We noted how in the narrative leading up to our passage Jacob dwells on his upcoming meeting with Esau: "For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me'" (32:20). The next morning Jacob sees his brother's face, a face which either shaped or was shaped by the last night's experience at the river: "Jacob said, 'No, I pray you, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept your present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor you have received me'" (33:10). Both in the premonition and in Jacob's actual address to Esau, the gift precedes the sight or recognition of the brother's face. The same sequence is upheld in our passage: the blessing is given, followed by the trope about the face. In the premonition Jacob merely fears seeing the face of his brother; in the dramatic inset of the river conflict, Jacob claims to see the face of God; and finally, in the actual meeting between brothers, Jacob relates the premonition to the struggle: seeing Esau's face reminds him of the visage of the opponent. So shocking was the face, glimpsed in the light of the rising sun, that Jacob names the place Peniel, quite literally "the face of God." In the comparison he makes the next day, Jacob recalls not only the awesome sight

but also the place after which it was named, where the struggle, colloquy and blessing occurred. If the two faces are compared, so also are their respective places. In his own way Jacob is making the same kind of intertextual connection that is attempted in this study.

One cannot forget that throughout Jacob's fraternal struggles there has been a succession of subtler struggles with God: the uncertain nature of the divine prophecy (25:23), Jacob's claim of divine aid and approval (27:20), his vow/bargain made with God before departing the homeland (28:20-22), his recollection of that vow in a dream (31:11-13), and his plea for protection from Esau (32:9-12). The last of these directly affects our reading of verse 29: "Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, lest he come and slay us all, the mothers with the children" (32:11). The same word *deliver* is used in Jacob's explanation for naming the place Peniel: "For I have seen the face of God, and yet my life is preserved [delivered]" (32:30). The repetition, however, sheds no clear light on our passage but only more shadows. A traditional reading would interpret verse 29 to mean simply that Jacob is astonished at having survived his glimpse at God. But could not the verse also mean that Jacob claims to have seen the face of God, yet, having survived the experience, is doubtful or puzzled about that identification? By the time Jacob meets Esau in the morning the identification has not only been transformed into the name of a place; it has also become a trope to describe his brother. Perhaps the real meaning of Peniel is one of confusion: in its explanation Jacob not only recognizes God's presence, but also his protection from Esau's hand.

The name Peniel, occurring in the last verses, replaces the first proper name that began our passage, the Jabbok. The two names, like the two names of the patriarch, chart a nominal shift from the human to the divine, from rejection to acceptance. Made of the same consonants as Jacob, the Jabbok might be said to connote the similar name's hint of infamy and insurgence. In contrast, Peniel provides the rhetoric that seals the rapprochement of the brothers. It is like the name Israel, which not only glorifies Jacob's past struggles but also resolves them with the past participle "prevailed" in the footnote etymology of verse 28b. Even as Jacob is in the midst of his greatest struggle, that penchant for struggle becomes formulated in the language of legend. Readers should not be surprised when Jacob and his brother Esau meet the next morning to weep in one another's arms. The struggle at the river has resolved their conflict. Resolved, too, is the vow/bargain made to God before Jacob's sojourn in Mesopotamia. One condition of the vow was that Jacob worship God in exchange for divine providence and deliverance to the homeland. After parting from a now friendly Esau, Jacob as Israel seals a pact with God, the other opponent, by building an altar. The last verse of chapter 33 reads:

"There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel [God, the God of Israel]."

But who is "man" at the river? He remains mysterious even now. I have suggested at different points that he is God, Esau, and somehow *both*. For obvious reasons the last identification is the most paradoxical; it is also the one which best responds to the ambiguities of the passage and their reverberations throughout the larger narrative. Any identification, however, must remain tentative. There is something appropriate about ending with the same question with which we began. As a *confusion* of the divine and the human, Jacob's opponent would naturally confuse our attempts to label him. Perhaps aware of these difficulties, he asks the reader along with Jacob in verse 28b, "Why is it that you ask my name?" The text of Genesis 32:22-32, ambiguous and elusive, answers at least that question.