

## Wrestling with the Angel of the LORD

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The video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/IKCbj2xc68U>

The scripture reading is Genesis 32:22-32

When I was in college a fellow student, during an acting class exercise, engaged in a mime like performance where he was in a wrestling match with an invisible opponent. His movements were so polished and coordinated to the point that you could, by just watching him, imagine that a real invisible opponent was present. In this Torah Portion we deal with Jacob's return to the Promised land after a twenty-year exile. The night before Jacob crosses the boundary, He has an encounter with what the Bible describes as an "angel of the LORD" and wrestles with the angel the entire night.

There is a lot of speculation among scholars about this incident. Who exactly was Jacob wrestling with? Was it an angel sent by God? Was this opponent a pre-incarnate appearance of Yeshua as many Christian commentators believe? What was the purpose of this mysterious wrestling match?

It seems to represent conflicts in Jacob's life on many levels. On the surface this account seems to conflict with just about everything we know or have come to know about the nature of God. Jacob had come to a critical crossroad and it was time to put things in order and perspective. It was time to deal with the many conflicts in his life. Particularly his life-long conflict with his twin brother Esau. Even before Jacob was born, he was in conflict with his brother Esau. Their mother Rebecca had a troubled pregnancy.

Genesis 25:21-22 NKJV 21 Now Isaac pleaded with the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his plea, and Rebekah his wife conceived. 22 But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If all is well, why am I like this?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

Even as the twins were born, there was conflict and competition between them.

Genesis 25:25-26 NKJV 25 And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

As they grew, there was continual conflict between them. Jacob is described as the mild man while Esau was the outgoing man of the field. Even their parents split their preferences between them.

Genesis 25:27-28 NKJV 27 So the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents. 28 And Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Eventually, a seemingly minor event, would be the pivotal moment in their lives that would set the stage for the future conflicts between Jacob and Esau and all their progeny through the rest of history.

Genesis 25:29-34 NKJV 29 Now Jacob cooked a stew; and Esau came in from the field, and he was weary. 30 And Esau said to Jacob, "Please feed me with that same red stew, for I am weary." Therefore his name was called Edom. 31 But Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright as of this day." 32 And Esau said, "Look, I am about to die; so what is this birthright to me?" 33 Then Jacob said, "Swear to me as of this day." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 And Jacob gave Esau bread and stew of lentils; then he ate and drank, arose, and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Later, there is deception involved in Jacob receiving the blessing, but there is also a greater plan ordained of God in play. As a result of Jacob receiving the blessing that Isaac intended for Esau, Jacob was forced to flee the land because of Esau's hatred and anger toward him. We discussed these conflicts and their immediate implications in our previous two studies.

This Torah portion picks up the life of Jacob after he had spent twenty years outside the Promised Land. During this time, Jacob had acquired both Leah and Rachel as wives along with many maidservants and man servants, oxen, donkeys, and flocks. In other words, Jacob had left the Promised Land alone and with virtually no possessions and was now returning as a wealthy man. Jacob sends messengers ahead to Esau announcing his return. Jacob hopes for reconciliation and peace with his brother.

Genesis 32:3-5 NKJV 3 Then Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. 4 And he commanded them, saying, "Speak thus to my lord Esau, 'Thus your servant Jacob says: "I have dwelt with Laban and stayed there until now. 5 "I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight.'"

The messengers return with a report that is very troubling to Jacob. Esau seems to be answering with hostility by sending an army to confront Jacob. Jacob prepares his entourage and then goes to the LORD in prayer.

Genesis 32:9-12 NKJV 9 Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, the LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your family, and I will deal well with you': 10 "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies and of all the truth which You have shown Your servant; for I crossed over this Jordan with my staff, and now I have become two companies. 11 "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. 12 "For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"

Hoping to stave off an attack by Esau, Jacob tries to make things right with Esau by sending messengers bearing gifts from his possessions or blessings he has received while in the employ of Laban. The messengers were sent to Esau in groups, or droves as the scripture describes it, to explain to Esau that these gifts are from Jacob and that Jacob is coming behind them in humility.

Genesis 32:17-21 NKJV 17 And he commanded the first one, saying, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, saying, 'To whom do you belong, and where are you going? Whose are these in front of you?' 18 "then you shall say, 'They are your servant Jacob's. It is a present sent to my lord Esau; and behold, he also is behind us.'" 19 So he commanded the second, the third, and all who followed the droves, saying, "In this manner you shall speak to Esau when you find him; 20 "and also say, 'Behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he said, "I will appease him with the present that goes before me, and afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me." 21 So the present went on over before him, but he himself lodged that night in the camp.

The phrase "he will accept me" in verse 20 is literally "he will lift up my face" like we read in the Young's literal translation.

Genesis 32:20b YLT 20 ...`I pacify his face with the present which is going before me, and afterwards I see his face; it may be he lifteth up my face;'

To lift up one's face is to look with approval. Jacob is returning a blessing to Esau from the blessings he received from God. Jacob is seeking Esau's approval.

Sometime in the night, Jacob took his two wives, two of his female servants, and his eleven sons and led them across the river and returned to his camp alone.

Genesis 32:22-23 NKJV 22 And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. 23 He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had.

After this Jacob has his encounter and wrestling match with the angel of the LORD who is identified as a man.

Genesis 32:24 NKJV 24 Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day.

Did Jacob wrestle with a man, an angel or with God? This is one of the most hotly debated questions among the sages and biblical scholars throughout history. Many Christian and Messianic commentators say that Jacob's opponent was a pre-incarnate Yeshua. They say that this is one of a number of Old Testament visitations by Yeshua Himself. Some of the Jewish sages on the other hand identify this adversary as Esau's evil angel<sup>i</sup> or the Archangel Michael.<sup>ii</sup> These interpretations seem unlikely since the Torah identifies his opponent as God.

Genesis 32:26-28 NKJV 26 And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" 27 So He said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." 28 And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Only God has the authority to change Jacob's name to Israel. But what is this encounter all about? In one aspect it represents the struggles and conflicts throughout Jacob's life. For the last few weeks, as we have read through these many chapters of Genesis, we have seen that Jacob has struggled from his mother's womb to receive the inheritance and promises first given to Abraham.

On a simple level this story seems preposterous. How can Jacob, a mere mortal man, wrestle with the infinite God, pin God to the ground and win? Unlike my college classmate wrestling his invisible opponent, there was no other person present to give an account of Jacob's wrestling match other than Jacob himself and Jacob identifies his opponent as God.

Genesis 32:29-30 NKJV 29 Then Jacob asked, saying, "Tell me Your name, I pray." And He said, "Why is it that you ask about My name?" And He blessed him there. 30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

On other levels we can see different aspects of this encounter. God is infinite, above and beyond His creation. Whenever He interacts with man and His creation, He does it in a finite way. The prophet Hosea observes that Jacob's opponent is both God and an angel.

Hosea 12:3-4b NKJV 3 He took his brother by the heel in the womb, And in his strength he struggled with God. 4 Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed;...

But can this wrestler be both God and an angel? Angels are not God, but they are messengers of God. But as we read God's word, we encounter in many places a mysterious "Angel of the LORD". This angel appears in many forms, the three men that visit Abraham prior to the judgment that came to Sodom and Gomorrah, the burning bush which Moses encountered, the pillar of cloud and fire guarding the Children of Israel in the wilderness, and the angel that went with them to the Promised Land.

In many of these Biblical accounts we see that the Angel of the LORD speaks in the first person and identifies Himself as the LORD. Jacob wrestled with this Angel of the LORD!

So how does one expect to interact with an infinite God? First Fruits of Zion in Shadows of the Messiah comments:

“Finite human beings cannot see, hear, or speak with the infinite. Our senses cannot perceive that which is beyond their limits. Our confined existence of three dimensions cannot contain the infinite. Therefore, if God wants to have any interaction with finite creation at all, He must do so under the guise of the finite.”<sup>iii</sup>

Even the sages of old imagined that God would limit or contract Himself so that He could interact with His creation. Through the Targums, the Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew scriptures, the sages communicated that their primary understanding of God’s interaction with His finite creation was through His word or memra. The apostle John clearly understood this ancient concept and applied it to Yeshua in his gospel. There would have been no doubt as to what John was saying among the Rabbis, Scribes and Pharisees who were familiar with the Targums.

John 1:1,14 NKJV 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... 14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Jacob’s encounter with the Angel of the Lord was a transforming experience on many levels. At the end of his wrestling match, God changed Jacob’s name to Israel which is derived from two Hebrew words. The first is number 8280 Saw-raw’ meaning to prevail or have power as in a prince. The other is number 410 ‘el meaning strength or mighty. It is also a shortened form of one of the names of God, El Shaddai.

When Jacob encountered the Angel of the LORD he received his new name. When we encounter Yeshua, we are also transformed and receive a new name so to speak. We are adopted into the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We receive citizenship through Yeshua in the commonwealth of Israel. And like Jacob, we will one day receive an actual new name.

Revelation 2:17 NKJV 17 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."

The story of Jacob is a story of concealed identity. Jacob’s identity was concealed from Isaac when Jacob received the blessing. Leah concealed her identity and became the mother of the line of Yeshua. And certainly, the story of Jacob alludes to the Messiah whose identity is concealed from Israel to this day.

This wrestling match between Jacob and the “man” whose identity is initially concealed from him, took place in the wilderness just outside the Promised land. Once Jacob received a blessing from his opponent, He realized his opponent’s true identity and named the place in memory of this meeting. The name Peniel means “face of God”

Genesis 32:30 NKJV 30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

It is likely that this story has a prophetic aspect and represents the ultimate return of Israel to the land. But just as Jacob sent his family, servants and livestock across the brook ahead of him, so too will the return of Israel to the Promised Land not happen all at once.

To this day Israel struggles, as we all do to some degree, with the identity of Messiah. Just as Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the LORD, whom he identifies as God, in the wilderness, so too will Israel meet God once again face to face and contend with Him in the wilderness before they fully enter the land.

Ezekiel 20:34-36 NKJV 34 "I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out. 35 "And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will plead My case with you face to face. 36 "Just as I pleaded My case with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will plead My case with you," says the Lord GOD.

The final return of Israel to the land has already begun in our time. And many of those returning have already begun to recognize their Messiah. So too have many Gentiles begun to recognize the true identity of Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah hidden among us for 2000 years. The story of Jacob and the wrestling match in the night reminds us that our struggle remains incomplete. We must persevere through the remainder of the night and the victory will come in the morning.

#### Study Questions:

1. Christian, and some Messianic commentators as well, often explain this, and other encounters in the Bible with an "Angel of the LORD", as being an encounter with a pre-incarnate Yeshua. Is this a legitimate interpretation? Why or why not?
2. How does Jacob's life-long struggle with Esau illustrate his struggle or wrestling with the "Angel of the LORD?"
3. What other accounts in the Bible concern a concealed identity? How do these accounts relate to struggling with God?
4. In Genesis 32:20 the phrase "he will accept me" or as the YLT translates it "he lifteth up my face", is two Hebrew words, nasa (נשא) and Paniym (פנים). Where else are these words used in the Torah? How do these other scriptures enhance our understanding of Jacob's meeting with Esau?
5. God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Jacob's name to Israel. How do these name changes reflect a change of identity and mission for them going forward? Are there other examples?
6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis Rabbah 78:3

<sup>ii</sup> Targum Pseudo-Yonatan

<sup>iii</sup> FFOZ The Shadows of the Messiah, D.T. Lancaster, 2017, Vol. 1 P199