

TOWARD A LITERARY UNDERSTANDING OF "FACE TO FACE" (MyniPA-lx, MyniPA) IN GENESIS 32:23-32

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1. Background

Were those who saw the face and heard the voice of Jesus of Nazareth during the first century CE the first (and only) people to encounter God himself in person?¹ Hundreds of years earlier, and recorded in five OT passages, the Lord is said to have encountered humanity MyniPA-lx, MyniPA, that is, face to face.² Surprisingly, given the vast amount of existing material on the OT theophanies, scholars have yet to discover the theological richness of these specific encounters.³ Therefore, with the use of certain textual, literary, and historical tools, this essay explores the four central elements inherent in the ancient Israelite understanding of their Lord's face to face interaction with his people. In the process, it also touches on how this concept affected the ancient Israelite understanding of God, of themselves, and even of the great patriarchs of their faith.

The study of the Lord's intimate presentation of himself in OT literature is central to understanding the nature of God's relationship with his chosen people, and it is within the context of the Lord's self-revelation that MyniPA-lx, MyniPA is selectively used in five separate passages, one of which is Gen

¹ That the doctrine of Jesus' fully human-divine nature has been repeatedly challenged and defended by scholars from a wide variety of theological traditions is well known. The purpose of this study, however, is not to analyze the nature of the NT Jesus, but rather to develop a deeper understanding of the OT Lord.

² Gen 32:31; Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10; Judg 6:22; Ezek 20:35.

³ The absence of previous research provides both the wondrous opportunity for new biblical exploration as well as the daunting task of fresh and original research. Consequently, the application of critical analysis to the five passages is done hand in hand with the investigation of ancient interpretations and insights (the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, the targumim, etc.).

32:31: "For I have seen Elohim face to face (MyniPA-lx, MyniPA)." This Hebrew phrase is reserved for encounters between the human and the divine, and although MyniPA-lx, MyniPA is used in specific circumstances and with certain parameters, it is not limited to use in a single book or a major division of the OT. Those involved in seeing God face to face include Jacob, Moses, Gideon, and the Israelites in exile. The Genesis 32 encounter on the shores of the Jabbok is explored on its own terms, and all the findings are united to form a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional nature of MyniPA-lx, MyniPA interaction. Specifically, the four inherent elements are (1) divine initiation, (2) profound intimacy, (3) intentional solitude, and (4) super natural verification.

Although the textual source for this study is the Masoretic Text (MT) as presented in BHS (4th ed.), other sources are carefully considered as well. The Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) not only sheds valuable light on the text of the Hebrew Bible, but, more importantly, it also presents an ancient understanding of the text. For example, given the conservative nature⁴ of the Samaritans, it is quite noteworthy⁵ when the SP attests a different text from the MT in the MyniPA-lx, MyniPA passages. Likewise, the Septuagint is a valuable aid in both the study of the textual history of the Hebrew Bible and the study of Jewish thought in the pre-Christian era. Finally, the paraphrastic Targums (Onqelos, Neofiti, and Jonathan) and the Syriac Peshitta have the same tendency as the Samaritan Pentateuch in that they, too, transcendentalize⁶ God throughout the text and, therefore, provide helpful interpretive insights.

2. Jacob and God "Face to face"

Perhaps no other OT narrative has evoked a wider range of understanding than that of Jacob as he wrestled with a mysterious opponent at the Jabbok River in Gen 32:23-33⁷ (with the identity of Jacob's assailant the

⁴ See R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1969) 222.

⁵ "[The] Samaritan Pentateuch transcendentalizes the concept of God; e. g., wherever in the MT God is said to deal directly with man without a mediator, or to descend to earth, the Samaritan Pentateuch substitutes `the angel of God.'" Bruce Waltke, "Samaritan Pentateuch" *ABD* 5.938.

⁶ "These more or less paraphrastic targums are of more value in understanding the way Jewish people understood their OT than for textual criticism." Bruce Waltke, "Textual Criticism of the Old Testament and Its Relation to Exegesis and Theology" *NIDOTTE* 1.59. See also Bernard Grossfeld, "The Targum Onqelos to Genesis" *TAB* 6.19, and Martin McNamara, "Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis" *TAB* IA. 34.

⁷ In the discussion of Genesis 32, the verse numbering of the MT will be used unless indicated otherwise.

most controversial). Not surprisingly, previous research has identified Jacob's exclamation "I have seen Elohim face to face!" as central to the passage although *face to face* seems to have been lost in the theological shadow of *Elohim*. Consequently, since the nature of MyniPA-lx, MyniPA interaction cannot be separated from the identity of those doing the interacting, both elements are explored, albeit the former issue naturally receives more attention than the latter.

3. Genre and Form

One of the first OT scholars to suggest that verses 23 and 33 form the correct textual limits of this passage was Samuel Driver,⁸ and his conclusions have been repeatedly confirmed.⁹ In addition, both the previous and the following pericopae deal with the relationship between Jacob and Esau, whereas the story of Jacob at the Jabbok omits any reference to Esau and instead focuses on Jacob and his mysterious assailant.¹⁰ Both the text itself and the content indicate that Gen 32:23-33 stands apart from the surrounding text as a distinct pericope.

With regard to the genre of this passage, it is evident that the prohibition in verses 32-33¹¹ and the name changes in verses 29 and 31¹² are primarily etiological in nature. If the formula "until this day" in verse 33 is also considered, the best conclusion is that the entire pericope functions as an etiological folk story¹³ in which the precise nature of Jacob's MyniPA-lx, MyniPA encounter at the Jabbok acts as the *supporting evidence* for the central

⁸ He noted that the previous pericope ends with "lodged that night," but v. 23 starts with "he rose up that night," thereby indicating that a new unit has begun. Samuel Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1904) 294.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 266; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 512; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 314; Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 347. (The MT also seems to suggest these limits in that both 32:23 and 33:1 start open D paragraphs).

¹⁰ This distinction is further elaborated in 4. Literary Context.

" For example, see von Rad, *Genesis*, 318; George Coats, *Genesis* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 230; and Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 270. Also, although it is never repeated anywhere else in the OT, this dietary prohibition is later re-affirmed via Maimonides' Law # 183 (12th cent. CE).

¹² See Gunkel, *Genesis*, 353; and E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1964) 256-57.

¹³ See Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 51. He also suggests that 32:23-33 can be described as a local story because what is narrated leads to the naming of the place and "no memorial stone is erected at the end to mark the place out as holy; it is therefore not a cult story" (*ibid.*, 514).

element:¹⁴ the name change from Jacob to Israel. In effect, the face to face encounter serves as a supernatural "stamp of approval," as is expanded upon later in this essay, not as a Jacob-initiated victory over a local god or spirit as is suggested by some.¹⁵

4. Literary Context

Traditionally, the book of Genesis has been divided into two main sections, chapters 1-11 (primeval history) and chapters 12-50 (patriarchal history), with the Jacob narrative placed in the latter. Prior to the events of Jacob's life, the patriarchal families (i.e., Abraham and Isaac) had been seminomadic and had not yet fully occupied the promised land¹⁶ of Canaan. Jacob's encounter at Penuel took place as he, with caution, was about to re-enter Canaan from Paddan Aram, where he had previously fled because of the anger of his brother, Esau. It was a homecoming filled with nervous anticipation.

Brueggemann suggests that within the larger Jacob narrative is a chiasmic structure in which the two main themes of the entire narrative are announced --the mysterious birth of Jacob and Esau and their intense interaction. Brueggemann's chiasmic analysis,¹⁷ presented below, identifies not only that the births are the centre of the narrative, but more importantly, that the events of Jacob's MyniPA-lx, MyniPA struggle at Penuel correspond to Jacob's previous dream of God at Bethel.

- Conflict with Esau (25:19-34; 27:1-45; 27:46-28:9)
 - [Human-Divine] Meeting at Bethel (28:10-22)
 - Conflict with Laban (29:1-30)
 - Births (29:31-30:24)
 - Conflict/Covenant (30:25-31:55)
 - [Human-Divine] Meeting at Penuel (32:22-32)
- Reconciliation with Esau (33:1-17)
- Closure and Transition (33:18-36:43)

¹⁴ See 4. Literary Context.

¹⁵ For example, von Rad writes, "How close our story is to all those sagas in which gods, spirits or demons attack a man and in which then the man extorts something of their strength and their secret" (*Genesis*, 316). Sharing the same thought, Gunkel states that this story about Jacob is "closely related to those legends and fairy tales that tell of a god compelled by a human through deceit or force to leave behind his secret knowledge or something else divine" (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 352).

¹⁶ Promised to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), Isaac (Gen 26:3-5), and Jacob (Gen 28:13-15).

¹⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 213. He also theorizes that the previous Abraham narrative is preoccupied with the concept of promise and the Jacob narrative with that of blessing (ibid., 206).

Within the smaller pericope of Gen 32:22-32 is another chiasm evident as well. The alternating speech between Jacob and his adversary, presented within the literary framework of seven *rm,xoy.va* (and he said), draws the reader to the central point (the fourth *rm,xoy.va*) of Jacob's own name, as shown below.

- Adv.: "Let me go for the dawn is rising." (v. 27)
 - Jacob: "I will not send you away unless you bless me." (v. 27)
 - Adv.: "What is your name?" (v. 28)
 - Jacob: "Jacob." (v. 28)
 - Adv.: "Your name is not called Jacob anymore but Israel, for. ..." (v. 29)
 - Jacob: "Please tell me your name." (v. 30)
- Adv.: "Why do you ask my name?" (v. 30)

Finally, a survey of the repetitive literary texture of Gen 32:23-33 in comparison to its immediate context highlights several features of the text itself. The most noteworthy is the complete *absence* in verses 23-33 of every element except the characters of Jacob and Myhilox<. While Jacob's possessions and his fear of his brother dominate the text before verses 23-33, Jacob's concern about the members of his immediate family are his primary concern in the subsequent passage. As shown in the summary¹⁸ below, the solitary¹⁹ events that took place between verses 23 and 33 dramatically changed Jacob's priorities.

	bqofEya	Myhilox<	vWAfe	family ²⁰	possessions ²¹
32:1-22	9	3	9	3	24
32:23-33	7	2	0	0	0
33:1-17	3	3	6	15	5

By means of the repetitive texture within the surrounding text, Jacob is intentionally portrayed as being *completely separated* from all of his possessions and family; the human-divine MyniPA-lx, MyniPA encounter is between Jacob and Myhilox< alone. There is no one present (friend or foe) either to witness Jacob's profound struggle or to verify the change of his name and identity.

¹⁸ This table is a summary of the full analysis given in Wessner, *Face to Face: Panim 'el-Panim in Old Testament Literature* (Theological Research Exchange Network, #048-0211, 1998), 109.

¹⁹ Jacob's removal and distance from everything else in his life is further emphasized at the end of v. 24 by means of the phrase *Ol-rw,xE*, which refers to all that Jacob had. In addition, the beginning of v. 25 makes Jacob's separation even clearer by the use of *ODbal; bqofEya rteUAyiva* (and Jacob was alone).

²⁰ Includes "mother, children, descendants, Rachel, Leah, Joseph, women."

²¹ Includes "cattle, donkeys, flocks, camels, ewes, rams, goats, hulls, herds, servants, people."

5. Biblical Context

Interestingly, the events of Jacob's encounter at Penuel are never directly quoted in the OT although the momentous occasion of Jacob's name change to Israel is referred to in two passages. In Gen 35:9-15, Jacob returned to Bethel, where God blessed him and renewed his covenant promise to him. In verse 10 God essentially repeated the words of 32:29: "And God said to him, '... no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.' And he [Elohim] called his name Israel." The second reference to Jacob's name change is in I Kgs 18:30-38, during the Israelites' dramatic and pivotal change of heart. According to verse 31, Elijah stated that the Lord himself had previously spoken to Jacob, saying, "Israel shall be your name," showing that, like the two passages in Genesis, the changing of Jacob's name to Israel was ultimately, if not directly, accomplished by God.

The concept of "God and man," as used in Gen 32:29, is used elsewhere in the OT, with some scholars seeing it as an expression of totality²² rather than as referring to two separate entities (i.e., the identification of Myhilox< as a representative rather than as a distinct individual). For example, Judg 9:9, 13 seem to indicate that "gods and men" is used inclusively and that neither the "gods" nor the "men" are treated individually. If Westermann's analysis is correct, the words of Jacob's assailant, "you have struggled with God and with men," may be representative of Jacob's whole life rather than a specific reference to an individual event (e.g., the crossing of the Jabbok) during the course of his life.

Even though Gen 32:23-33 is never directly quoted elsewhere, there is a significant (and necessary) allusion to it in Hos 12:4-5,²³ which states that Jacob contended with Myhilox< and also struggled with a j`xAl;ma (angel). This text, which looks back to various events throughout Jacob's life, is divided into three separate bicola. The first bicolon shows both syntactic and semantic parallelism B; , perfective verbs, tx,), while both the second and third have syntactic parallelism (two imperfective verbs with an object in each line and imperfective verbs and object suffixes in each line, respectively).

In this passage, Douglas Stuart notes that the bicolon in verse 4 is the first half of a quatrain that includes verse 5a, thereby uniting the first two bicola under one theme²⁴--Jacob's struggle²⁵ with his adversary. In fact, this four-line unit also has an inherent chiastic structure of its own, as shown in

²² Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 518.

²³ As in Genesis 32, the verse numbering in Hosea 12 will follow the MT.

²⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Dallas: Word, 1987) 190.

²⁵ hrAWA in v. 4 and either rUAWA (a by-form of hrW) or rraWA in v. 5.

the text below, further clarifying the intentional correspondence between $j^{\prime}xAl;ma$ and $Myhilox<$.

- a In the womb he grasped the heel of his brother
- b and in his strength he contended with Elohim.²⁶
- b' He ruled over/struggled with an angel and prevailed
- a' he wept and he pled for grace with him.²⁷

Therefore, despite the elaborate attempts of some scholars²⁸ to explain verse 5a as parallel to events in Jacob's life²⁹ other than his wrestling at the Jabbok (e.g., Gen 30:8), Hosea is simply referring to Jacob's physical struggle with $Myhilox<$ and is as ambiguous about the identity of his assailant as is the narrator of the Genesis account. For Hosea, the $Myhilox<$ with whom Jacob contended is not to be understood as God himself but rather as corresponding to $j^{\prime}xAl;ma$, that is, a messenger sent on behalf of God.

6. Other Ancient Literature

Although the story of Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok has no biblical parallels, it does have a loose connection with other Ancient Near Eastern accounts, and its apparent association with other ANE river-deity encounters is well documented.³⁰ Ronald Hendel, however, is careful to say that "Jacob's adversary is neither a night demon nor a river-god; Jacob names him in v. 31 as Elohim. Nonetheless there are thematic continuities in the Penuel encounter with traditional images of other conflicts and other gods."³¹ Hendel also sees YHWH's adversarial role evident in other OT passages such as when YHWH seeks to kill Moses (Exod 4:24-26) and when he tests Abraham (Genesis 22). Quite possibly, the narrator of Genesis may have had such a parallel in mind, although he did not mimic it exactly. For example, Jacob was not completely victorious (he left with a physical limp), and although he received a blessing, the focus of the text seems to be on the changing of his name.

²⁶ $Myhilox<$ can refer to God, divine beings (Zech 12:8) or ghosts (1 Sam 28:13), and even Moses was given the title by the Lord himself (Exod 7:1).

²⁷ Cf. Gen 33:4, 8.

²⁸ Francis Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1980) 608-14.

²⁹ For example, nowhere else does the OT record Jacob weeping or pleading with an angel.

³⁰ For example, see John Scullion, "The Narrative of Genesis" ABD 2.952, Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 515; and Gunkel, Genesis, 352.

³¹ Ronald Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 105. He gives the example of a 7th-cent. BCE Phoenician incantation of the god Sasam that says, "The sun rises 0 Sasam: Disappear, and fly away home."

Since it is generally accepted that the ancient Samaritan Pentateuch systematically avoids any anthropomorphic presentation of God, it is significant that the Genesis 32 pericope does not reflect any variant from the text of the Masoretes. This could indicate that 1) the passage was "overlooked" in the translation/interpretation process (which is unlikely, given the thousands of variants elsewhere); 2) the Samaritans were not offended by God's personal encounter with Jacob (also unlikely considering the prevalence of transcendentalization throughout the text); or 3) the Samaritans did not consider the recorded events as portraying a physical and direct encounter between God himself and an earth-bound man. Clearly, the third option is the most logical because the Samaritans likely understood that Jacob's statement "I have seen *Elohim* face to face" was not blasphemous since Jacob's adversary was not actually *YHWH* in person, but rather was someone with God-sent authority.

With regard to the Genesis 32 pericope, the Septuagint reflects the same textual nuances as the MT, especially in two significant elements. Similar to the Hebrew Myhilox , the Greek term $\text{qeo} < j$ used in verse 31 ("I saw $\text{qeo} > n$ face to face") does not necessarily refer exclusively to God, but can also refer to a man, as in Exod. 7: 1. Of prime importance to this study, however, is the use of "face to face" ($\text{pro} < \text{swpon pro} > j \text{ pro} < \text{swpon}$) in the Septuagint text of verse 30. In his speech, Jacob declared, "I saw ($\text{o[ra} < w, 2d \text{ aorist active}$) $\text{qeo} > n$ face to face" reflecting the corresponding Hebrew syntax of "I have seen (hxr, Qal) Myhilox face to face." In both texts, Jacob (the subject) asserted himself to be acting as the active agent in the face to face encounter, a role that the Biblical narrator reserves exclusively for God or his agent in the four other OT passages.

Written hundred of years later, Targum Onqelos, Targum Neofiti, and the Peshitta all reflect significant variations from the Hebrew text surrounding the phrase MyniPA-lx, MyniPA in Genesis 32. Since the nature of these writings is to paraphrase and interpret freely during the process of translation, it is not surprising that Jacob's adversary is clearly identified in the texts as an angel.³² By the time of the targumim and the Peshitta, there is little room for misinterpreting the identity of Jacob's opponent at Jabbok; he is clearly understood as an angelic being representing the Lord.

7. Conclusion

The Genesis text unquestionably says that Jacob physically saw someone face to face, but that someone was neither an ordinary man nor God himself,³³ as is often assumed, but rather a messenger acting on behalf of

³² Targum Neofiti goes even further by actually naming the angel as 'Sariel' (v. 25).

³³ As for other instances of the seemingly intentional blurring of the distinction

God. Not only does the text itself suggest this conclusion by the intentional use of *Myhiilox*, but the earliest readers also understood that Jacob's adversary was a divine messenger (cf. Hosea, Targum Onqelos, Targum Neofiti, and the Peshitta).

As in all five biblical occurrences of *MyniPA-lx*, *MyniPA*, the four inherent elements of *divine initiation*, *profound intimacy*, *intentional solitude*, and *supernatural verification* are clearly evident in Gen 32:23-33. For example, Jacob's wrestling match was caused by the sudden appearance and unexpected attack of the heavenly sent "man" during the night. Ironically, Jacob had spent the previous day preparing for a dramatic encounter, but he was expecting to meet his brother Esau, not the powerful messenger who was declared to be *Myhilox* not only was Jacob's encounter physically intimate, but it also involved the very essence of his identity-the identification and the change of his name. The physical touch, the name change, and the personal blessing all serve to portray the profound intimacy experienced between Jacob and the divine messenger.

As well, the Hebrew text of the pericope presents Jacob's complete solitude quite effectively not only by stating that "he sent across [the Jabbok] all that he had" and he "was left alone," but also by the complete absence of any terms of possession or family in verses 23-33. Therefore, the divinely initiated *MyniPA-lx*, *MyniPA* interaction, including the supernaturally induced limp (and possibly the prohibition), served as a God-sent physical "sign" to verify and legitimize the primary (and private) event of the pericope, that is, the change of Jacob's name to Israel. Both the personal and theological significance of his encounter required some type of verification from God himself (cf. Moses and the pillar of cloud, Gideon and the sacrifice consumed by fire) if his unique encounter was to be taken seriously. His was no mere spiritual or illusory encounter that could easily be dismissed by his contemporaries: it was a physical encounter with the divine.

between a man, the Lord, and an angel, one need look no further than other passages such as Genesis 16 (Hagar), Genesis 18-19 (Abraham), or Judges 13 (Manoah).

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