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Face to Face:
The Visitation near Jabbok

Davin B. Anderson

Jacob, one of the great biblical characters during the Patriarchal Age, was a man who was well acquainted with heavenly visitations as recorded in the Book of Genesis. At Mahanaim, Jacob was met by a host of angels (Gen. 32:1–2). At Bethel, the ancient Canaanite city of Luz, it was God who on two different occasions appeared before Jacob (Gen. 28:11–22; 35:6–15). The biblical accounts of these three numinous experiences are straightforward in that they precisely document what type of activity took place during the event and what type of heavenly being (whether an angel or God) visited Jacob. However, the book of Genesis evinces that Jacob experienced yet a fourth heavenly visitation en route to Canaan from Northwest Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, this experience is not always categorized as such because of the unintelligible manner in which portions of the text have been preserved. This visitation is, of course, the famous "confrontation" of Genesis 32:22–32 near the Ford of Jabbok, east of the Jordan River. The various disjointed and at times illogical sections of this pericope have engendered a timeless debate concerning five chief polemical issues: (1) the nature of the physical encounter, (2) the identity of the unnamed visitor, (3) the nature of Jacob’s injured thigh, (4) the nature of the undefined blessing obtained by Jacob, and (5) the nature and validity of the dietary proscription used to conclude the pericope.

It is the author’s view that each of these five controversial elements can be reconciled in such a way as to legitimize the experience recorded in Genesis 32:22–32 as a divine visitation—
encompassed in sacred ritual—between Jacob and God. This, the first in a series of planned papers, will cover the first two polemical issues concerning (1) the physical nature of the encounter and (2) the unidentified visitor. The methodology used in this paper is based principally on analysis of the pericope itself rather than the exegetical “tendency to neglect the text,” to become “preoccupied with writing the text’s pre- or post-history,” and to overlook the “inescapable fact which is the testimony of scripture” in its original language. The text is given below in its entirety with versification to benefit the reader:

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” 27 The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. 28 Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.” 29 Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” 31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon. (Genesis 32:22–32)

The Physical Nature of the Encounter

It is quite appropriate to begin with this topic since the overall significance of Jacob’s encounter near the ford of Jabbok rests
largely on the interpretation of the phrase נָרָבָא used in the Hebrew text to designate the so-called famous “wrestle.” Excluding the two occurrences in Genesis 32:25–26, the root נָרָבָא appears a total of six other times in the Hebrew Bible where its basic meaning is linked to “dust” or “powder.” Based on this association with the dust of the earth, the traditional reading of verses 25 and 26 depict a wrestle or struggle on the ground in such a manner as to “get dusty.” However, it should be emphasized that this mainstream interpretation of the root נָרָבָא is more conjecture than fact due to the infrequency in which the root appears in the Hebrew Bible. Other estimations on the meaning of the root in the context of this pericope have been set forth. For instance, Wenham sees the usage of נָרָבָא in verses 25 and 26 as a discernable word play on the geographical location of the pericope at “Jabbok” (נָרָבָא), or even as a crafty distortion of the name “Jacob” (יְהוָהַעֲֽבוֹד). On account of this, the meaning of נָרָבָא could be paraphrased as “he Jabboked him” or as “he Jacobed him.” Although such estimations are intriguing, they are essentially worthless in guiding the reader to a real understanding of what sort of physical encounter actually took place. Therefore, other possible meanings for the root in question need to be investigated.

Nachmanides (1194–1270 A.D.), a prolific rabbinic authority and biblical commentator of Spanish descent, intimated that the phrase נָרָבָא should actually be נָרָבָא, thereby generating the translation of “and he embraced him.” Nachmanides proceeded to explain that the Hebrew letter נ was difficult for the Sages “to pronounce in their language and so they used the easier aleph” in this instance. Hugh Nibley converges upon the same perspective by stating, “The word conventionally translated by ‘wrestled’ can just as well mean ‘embrace’ and . . . this [was a] ritual embrace that Jacob received.” In addition, Keil and Delitzsch suggest, “It was not a natural or corporeal wrestling, but a real conflict of both mind and body, a work of the spirit with intense effort of the body, in which Jacob was lifted up into a highly elevated condition of body and mind.”
Thus, it is clear that some see the by-form בָּמָה, a root that surely engenders mystical images in the context of Jacob's encounter, as a highly probable substitute for בָּמָה in verses 25 and 26. Such a ritualistic reading would not prove to be out of place in the Genesis account when one examines the structural underlining of Genesis 27 and 48 wherein "the formal summons to the son to be blessed, the subsequent identification of that son, the symbolic kiss exchanged between blesser and blessed, and the formulaic pronouncement of blessing are all motifs redolent with the language of ceremony and cult." Hence, it is the author's opinion that the physical nature of Jacob's encounter near the ford of Jabbok was not one of moral strength and ingenuity, not a competitive brawl, but rather something like a ritualistic embrace in "a contest with the weapons of prayer."

The Unidentified Visitor—An Angel?

If one had to select the most puzzling element of the Genesis 32:22–32 pericope, it would most likely be the unidentified visitor whom Jacob encounters. Over the years, scholars have promulgated multiple views in reference to Jacob's mysterious caller depicted simply as a "man" (וָמָה) in Genesis 32:24. The established theory among most scholarly circles purports that Jacob was confronted by an angel, sometimes deemed to be the popular, yet highly ambiguous being known as the "Angel of the Lord." The most significant biblical passage supporting this rendering of the text is found in the book of Hosea where, in his intent to highlight a few monumental events in the "Genesis Jacob Cycle" (Genesis 25:19–35:22), Hosea recounts:

In the womb [Jacob] grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there—the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name of renown! (Hosea 12:3–5)
As mentioned above, biblical scholars have often referred to this passage to conclude that Jacob's visitor near the ford of Jabbok was indubitably an angel. Although it is true that Hosea employed the Hebrew noun מָלָאך, which is most commonly translated as (1) "messenger" or (2) "angel, as messenger of God," in Hosea 12:4, several important arguments can be made to demonstrate that Hosea's summary of the event is not sufficient evidence to insist that Jacob was visited by an angel and nothing more.

For example, Eslinger suggests that Hosea's summary of the Genesis Jacob Cycle should be viewed as a case of inner biblical exegesis, meaning that it is one of the "concrete examples of scriptural reinterpretation that have themselves been included in canon." In his intriguing analysis of the reasons for and the product of Hosea's reinterpretation of the "Genesis Jacob," Eslinger notes in particular the usage of מָלָאך in Hosea 12:4:

The change from the 'ish of Gen.32:25 to the mal'ak of v. 5a [Eslinger uses MT versification throughout] . . . is to be viewed as a claim to authority by Hosea. He envisioned his own prophetic role as that of God's envoy sent to engage Israel in a conflict that would also lead to re-submission to God. In 12:3, Hosea makes formal announcement of Yahweh's dispute with contemporary Israel. This formal dispute was Hosea's way of engaging Israel in a confrontation with Yahweh, just as long before the messenger had struggled with Jacob and prevailed . . . Just as Jacob had wept and supplicated to Esau after submitting to God and the mal'ak [Hosea 12:4, Genesis 33:4, 10], so, Hosea suggests, Israel should do likewise.

Eslinger's argument is rather compelling and one that seriously threatens the opinion of those who suppose that Jacob encountered an angel because it calls into question the historical authenticity of Hosea's reference to the מָלָאך.

The textual structure of Hosea 12:2–6 is a second argument that challenges the validity of Hosea's מָלָאך. A detailed perusal of
this text reveals that Hosea deliberately arranged this passage into Hebraic chiasmus form. In reference to this fact, Holladay states, “These chiasmus are not forced on Hosea by the contents of his message; the material could easily be rearranged into normal parallelism. Hosea has intended them.” Why did Hosea expend the effort to formulate the chiasmus? What significant meaning was he seeking to convey? It is well known that the main message of a chiasmic passage is derived from its center element, which in the chiasmus format of Hosea 12:2–6 is composed of two phrases: “as a man he struggled with God” and “he struggled with the angel and overcame him” (italics added). When distinguishing the parallel between “God” and the “angel” in these two salient phrases, the dominant theme of this chiasmus seems to focus on Jacob’s interaction with heavenly beings more than anything else. According to this insight, it should be stressed that it was the notion of the divine visitor at the ford of Jabbok, not the angel per se, that Hosea chose to accentuate in his chiasmic account.

The Unidentified Visitor—God!

Furthermore, there are several biblical passages that question whether Hosea meant to imply something more than a mere “angel” with his usage of the noun גֵּאֶל. The most applicable passage to the discussion at hand is found in Genesis 48 where Joseph brought his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to his father Jacob so that they could obtain a blessing from the great Patriarch’s hand. In this setting, Jacob addressed God by saying, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has led me all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads” (Genesis 48:15–16; RSV, italics added). With this simple, but most significant blessing, Jacob lucidly demonstrated his perception that God and angel can be seen as analogous terms, for he referred to the God of his fathers as the same “angel” of his deliverance. Nibley reasons through this overt paradox by
explaining that the noun “angel” has developed a “sense of a gener-ic name for the beings of the heavenly world.” Therefore, “any heavenly being is properly an angel,” including “Jehovah himself in his capacity of a messenger to men.”

In addition, a handful of other biblical passages make this same correlation between God and the otherwise mysterious Angel of the Lord (or Angel of God). One pertinent example that involves Jacob is a certain dream sequence in Genesis 31:11–13. The text reads, “The angel of God said to me in the dream . . . ‘I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to me’” (italics added). The reference to Jacob’s experience at Bethel in this passage is documented in Genesis 28:11–22 and Genesis 35:6–15. It is significant that this dream sequence begins with the “angel of God” as its main character because the Bethel texts indubitably establish God as Jacob’s heavenly visitor. Thus, a careful comparison between this and other contextually related passages reveals that this “most striking . . . figure of the mal’ak yhwh [Angel of the Lord] . . . speaks in God’s name and occasionally appears as Yahweh himself.”

To be sure, the confusion concerning the visitor in the Genesis 32:22–32 pericope would be presumably nonexistent if a more expressive Hebrew word other than רְשָׁע would have been utilized in Genesis 32:24 to describe the being whom Jacob encountered. The noun רְשָׁע when compounded with other nouns can take on various meanings, but when standing alone in the Hebrew Bible it is a rather generic term that is ordinarily rendered as “man,” “husband,” or “male.” However, in the case of the Jabbok encounter, none of these common translations are satisfactory, since neither of them support Hosea’s somewhat tenuous poetic portrayal of Jacob’s spiritual confrontation with an angel, nor more importantly, Jacob’s enthusiastic claim to have seen God in Genesis 32:30. Thus, the critical inquiry that must be answered is whether textual examples from the Hebrew Bible exist in which the noun רְשָׁע, due to the narrative context of the passage, expresses the presence of a heavenly
being, either an angel or God himself.

There are, in fact, a few scattered biblical passages that provide evidence for such a phenomenon, the most salient reference being Genesis 18:1–33. This lengthy scriptural segment begins by stating, “The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day” (Genesis 18:1). Thereafter the story relates that it was three unnamed “men” (הָאָנָחָים, plural for נְאָשִׁים) who wandered into Abraham’s camp. Thus, with the juxtaposition of these two sets of visitors—God and the three men—the biblical writer established a pattern that depicts God as being one of these three men. Even though the majority of the passage only hints at this relationship, verse 22 drops any pretense of ambiguity by stating, “The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.” In other words, two of the נְאָשִׁים left Mamre for Sodom (See Genesis 19:1), while God, being the third member of this unnamed party of נְאָשִׁים, stayed behind to converse with Abraham about the future destruction of Sodom. Thus, Wenham asserts, “Here at last the identity of the visitors is clarified: one is or represents the Lord; the other two are angelic companions.” As a result, Genesis 18:1–33 is a premier text with which to compare Genesis 32:22–32 because it plainly associates the Hebrew noun נְאָשִׁים with God.

Moreover, certain elements in ancient rabbinical thought constitute another viable source that draws a parallel between נְאָשִׁים and God. The ancient rabbis, or “Sages,” were astute in discovering appellations for God through their dedicated study of the Hebrew Bible. They were seen as men of “real piety and true knowledge of God” who illuminated “God’s relation to men and the world’s relation to God, His attributes and nature in such manifold ways and names.” In fact, some of the most popular names for God in modern Jewry stem from the rabbinical tradition. The exact number of appellations the ancient rabbis attributed to God varies from list to list. One highly pertinent source enumerates ninety-one rabbinic
titles for God and present among this list is the term א"ל. Although some prominent Jews of ancient times, such as the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.), did not accept this designation as a true name for God, there were many authoritative rabbis who, like Rabbi Akiba (45-135 C.E.), fully endorsed the pronouncement of the term as a title for God. Consequently, in the opinion of some of the earliest biblical scholars, the Hebrew term for “man” could, at times, be employed to represent God. Although this argument does not represent insurmountable evidence to directly link the divine appellation א"ל of the rabbis with the usage of א"ל in Genesis 32:24, it does, however, posit some portion of corroborating evidence that should not be ignored.

Of course, the most substantial source of textual support for the argument that it was God who visited Jacob near the ford of Jabbok is Jacob’s personal witness near the end of the event: “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Gen. 32:30, RSV). The key phrase here is “face to face” (א"ל א"ל א"ל א"ל א"ל), which occurs only five times in the entire Hebrew Bible, each reference solely dedicated to expressing an actual heavenly visitation (only one of which is not performed by God) to an individual or to the Israelites as a whole. On account of this, Drinkard defines א"ל as “the most common word in the [Old Testament] for ‘presence’ in a broader sense than just ‘face.’ Thus panim was used in reference to . . . being in Yahweh’s presence.” Drinkard concludes by stating, “It seems obvious that ‘seeing Yahweh’s face’ had much the same meaning of entering Yahweh’s presence directly.” Hence, analysis of the original Hebrew text unequivocally confirms that Jacob did not express some sort of aspirant desire, but rather an undeniable reality as he proclaimed, “I have seen God face to face.” Shortly after his Jabbok encounter, Jacob further verified this reality by declaring to his brother Esau, “To see your face is like seeing the face of God” (Gen. 33:10).
Conclusion

It is vital to explore every detail, no matter how minute, of each verse in the Genesis 32:22–32 pericope in order to come to a complete understanding of this highly significant text. It is also vital to allow the original Hebrew of the text to speak for itself in an effort to perceive its original meaning. By means of these two exegetical guidelines, the author has attempted to illustrate that it was indeed God who appeared before Jacob near the ford of Jabbok, as he did twice at Bethel; and that the physical nature of this encounter was a type of ritual embrace between man and deity.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, there are yet three other polemical elements in this pericope that likewise must be thoroughly defined in order to eliminate the mystery that surrounds the text and arrive at a solid conclusion of what actually happened in Jacob’s encounter. The aim of this author is to do so in a series of papers of which this is the first; to ultimately show that Jacob’s eventful night near the ford of Jabbok was not some indefinable “strange adventure,” but rather a ritualistic temple experience par excellence.

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Notes

1. In the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), the pericope begins with verse 23 and goes to verse 33. Therefore, the synchronization between MT (32:23–33) and the standard English versions (32:22–32) is off by one verse.
2. The next paper concerning this pericope will cover (3) the nature of Jacob’s injured thigh and (4) the nature of the undefined blessing given to
Jacob, while the final paper of this series will be dedicated to exploring (5) the nature and validity of the dietary proscription used to conclude the passage of Genesis 32:22–32.


4. Unless otherwise specified, all biblical passages cited in this paper are from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV).


7. Ibid.


9. Ibid., 404.


19. Ibid., 96.
20. Ibid., 94–95.
23. Ibid.
27. See also Joshua 5:13–15 and Judges 13:2–24, which respectively associate "man" with the heavenly "commander of the army of the Lord" and "the angel of the LORD."
28. God is explicitly mentioned in Genesis 18:13, 17, 20, 22, 26, and 33, while the set of unnamed הָעַל are mentioned in Genesis 18:2, 16, 22.
31. An example of some popular names for God that were first pronounced by the ancient rabbis are Adonai, El, Elaha, Elohim, Shaddai, Ha-Kadosh, Barukh Hu, Ha-Makom, Shekhinah, Ehu Soph, and Melakhim. [Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Macmillan
32. For the list of ninety-one rabbinic titles for God see Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God: The Names and Attributes of God*, 54–107. For Xya 'ish as a rabbinic title for God see Ibid., 65.

33. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrines of God: Essays in Anthropomorphism*, vol. 2, 7–9. Philo of Alexandria, a leader among Diasporan Jews in Egypt, was well trained in Hellenistic thought, and therefore, was opposed to honoring the name וָשָׁנ as a reverent title for God because of the anthropomorphic overtones inherently present in such a title. [Ibid.].

34. Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10 both refer to Moses and his experiences of seeing God “face to face” (אֶלֶן יְהֹוָה). Ezekiel 20:35 is metaphorlic council given by Ezekiel to try to coerce the children of Israel to return to God in righteousness so that God could once again plead with them “face to face” as in the wilderness of Sinai. At first glance, Judges 6:22 is the only case wherein the phrase “face to face” is not explicitly used as a direct reference to beholding God, for in this verse Gideon’s heavenly visitor is described as the “Angel of the Lord.” Yet, this author argues that in respect to the evidence that has been presented in this paper concerning the literal correlation between God and the “Angel of the Lord” (see note #30), Judges 6:22 should not be viewed as a variant to the established pattern.


36. Ibid.