Fording the Jabbok

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Let us read the translation of the passage by Alter (1996). The verses in italics are those passages thought to have been added by a later redactor to the Yahwistic text. We shall not worry about the reasons given by scholarship for the existence of at least two (perhaps even three) main layers in the story, The commentary by K. Westermann studies these layers in depth (*Genesis 12-36: a commentary*, 1985). The detail of the argument is important but would be a little overwhelming here and superfetatory (as befits a Jacobian twin). Let lineaments suffice. The Yahwist is thought to be re-using older, undatable, material (layer 1), namely a local folktale of a universally known type regarding a spirit or troll of the river, to which the name of Jacob was not yet attached. Indeed, the Jabbok/Jacob pair is a less than perfect metathesis, since the *'ayin* of Jacob is in the way. On the other hand, the better pair of words, hence their presumed original featuring in an old local folktale, is provided by the name of the river, Jabboq יַבֹּק, and the wrestling, וַיֵּאָבֵק. The Yahwist (early or late Judaean, I vote for the latter, for reasons having to do with the late use of writing in the kingdom of Judah: so, –8th-7th centuries) integrated the tale in a larger cycle of longish stories concerning Jacob. It was perhaps already attached to Jacob by northern Israelite traditions, but not yet arranged in this kind of larger-frame story that we have now. Travels across and outside the "land" (from Bethel in the south to Gilead in the northeast), conflicts arranged in imbricated pairs (Esau/Jacob, Laban/Jacob, Leah/Rachel), and their resolutions, all of this book-ended by night visions of the "man" or Yahweh, no doubt the author is a story-teller and a thinker who is skillfully using Israelite traditions about Jacob their ancestor. As said supra, the text in

italics seems to be a more recent addition: it makes Jacob disabled in verse 26b, yet Jacob is able to wrestle his opponent until dawn. It also introduces the re-naming of Jacob as Israel, as a counterpart of Jacob's question to his opponent, and gives it a strange, intellectual, explanation: "You have striven with God". Theophoric names normally expressed a divine action, protection in this particular case, not an action by the name-bearer. So, this particular explanation for the name "Israel" is odd. It happens to avoid the more probable meaning of the name "Israel," which is "El is prince" or "El rules," and doesn't fit the later domination by Yahweh. Finally, it explains an otherwise unknown dietary rule and adds a "to this day" that looks more recent. Westermann notes that many flights of theological thinking are based on these putatively late insertions into the story. He would like serious theology to take into account the layering in the text.

Text of 32.23-33

23 And he rose on that night and took his two wives and his two slavegirls and his eleven boys and he crossed over the Jabbok ford. 24 And he took them and brought them across the stream, and he brought across all he had. 25 And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. 26 And he saw that he had not won out against him and he touched his hip-socket *and Jacob's hip-socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him.* 27 And he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 28 *And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob". 29 And he said, "Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and won out."* 30 And Jacob asked and said, "Tell your name, pray." And he said, "Why should you ask my name?" and there he blessed him. 31 *And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen God face to face and I came out alive."* 32 And the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel and he was limping on his hip. 33 *Therefore the children of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh which is by the hip-socket to this day, for he touched Jacob's hip-socket at the sinew of the thigh.*

Commentary

One may conceive of the book of Genesis as centering time and space, i.e., mapping these fundamental dimensions of the Israelite and Judaean historical experience? Where and when would be this center? The obvious answer is to say Sinai (a then, with a unrecoverable where, a mountain: any would do, including some mount in the Hedjaz for some American fundamentalists) and Jerusalem (the temple). The question of a center is tied to a loss that is framed as a movement eastwards: from the planting of an Eden east, to an expulsion east of this garden, followed by a movement further east, and eventually a paradigmatic return by Abra/ha/m.

Abraham is told to go to "a place", "a land", it is a promise of fulfillment, of time relaxing its tension towards a future. Sarah's barrenness, therefore, is a great obstacle, an anguish of time going by. The birth of Isaac therefore is divorced from the normal "begetting," and is the product of long waiting, beyond all possibilities, an election. In terms of time frames, however, the three patriarchal figures are different. Abraham is all tensed up towards the future, whereas Isaac is in the "now", a copy of a blessing. With Jacob, his story of a loss and a return, one has an even more intense present, a struggle with present conditions.

Where does chapter 32 exactly begin? The ancient reading cycle begins וישלח at 32.4. Angels or divine messengers are met again on Jacob's return to "the land." In a military context (Laban, then Esau), Jacob encounters "God's camps" (in the dual), i.e. a defensive army around the land: perhaps the land of Eden again, as in 3.24: "he set up east of the garden of Eden the Cherubim and the flame of the whirling sword to guard the way to the tree of life." Jacob has dreams of angels when leaving the land, in Bethel. The land of Canaan is the permanent home, the center of this world, and Jacob is the third character to have it at the center of his life. Abraham comes to the land, gets promised a son, and gets to keep him. Isaac's life is entirely spent in the land (in the Beersheba area), and his main role is to transfer the blessing to the correct heir. Jacob does leave the land but returns to it. The promise is now to rest on the future twelve sons: how will they get along on the land? [all of this reviewed or even created by late authors and tradents who are reflecting on their history].

Jacob imitates the divine realm. First of all, he sends messengers before him, and reverses the hidden order of primogeniture (Lord vs slave or servant in 32.5). Esau, the reader is to presume, has inherited everything

from Isaac (and has added to it by his raids?). Secondly, Jacob divides his fortune into two camps. As Alter says, everything splits into binary oppositions: creating a new, complex world of family, economic, and political tensions. All of Jacob's life is split: his childhood with Esau, his marriage to Leah and Rachel (duplicated by concubines), and his conflict with Laban (29–31: three stories of conflict).

In Gen 32, we return to stones and a place of sacrifice (there was a sacrifice at the end of 31). There are limits on the "nations," framed with the criterion of access to women as the major guideline. Jacob, limping, joins his new extended family, and avoids his "old" family (Esau and Laban) but without going to war with either. He just keeps at a distance. This text may represent historical ninth to eighth century tensions with Aramaean kingdoms in the north and Edom with Se'ir in the south. Jacob has a new destiny. His relationship with the Schechemites is put in parallel with that of the Hittites and Abraham: buying property for a grave, but here it is the corner of a field for tents. It is distinguished from his relations with Laban and Esau.

32.1 למקמו Laban *to his place.* A place with a possessive. How is ארץ used with a possessive? Jacob "went [along] his way." Why not "to his place?" The possessive is not yet used, the land is attached to a divine master.

32.4 Jacob sends messengers (angels) like God. לפניו: before him, word-code (face, "turn," before).

32.5 my lord / your servant: this is a reversal of what happens in Gen 27.

32.14 מנחה a present for Esau (a camp?).

32.17 "Pass (cross) before me." these words appear again and again, tying the dangerous encounter with Esau to the night encounter with the "man."

32.21 "I will cover his face" with the present before me, and later I will see his face; perhaps he will lift my face. Note that Jacob throughout this story is slow, delayed, dilatory also, against the quick-witted and strong, fast decision-making we see him use at the beginning. Here he is willing to give up almost everything (as Abraham was).

For the struggle between Esau and Jacob, one may take as point of departure the article by Elie Wiesel about the 2 brothers, in which he tries to evince some sympathy for Esau. I note that Esau hunts and is close to Isaac, who has a pronounced taste for meat, venison actually (Gen 25.24-

28), whereas Jacob stays close by the tents, close by Rebekah's skirts, a little like young Joseph who remains close to his father.

Then, in Gen 27, we have this fascinating story about taste, hearing, seeing, touch, and smelling, in which Isaac seems to have lost all of his senses, or at least they are terribly dulled (which is what must have temporarily happened to Jacob also during the night of his first marriage). Isaac cannot taste the difference between wild and domesticated! He cannot tell or feel the difference between the wild and the tame, the straighforward (Esau, Enkidu?) and the wily (Jacob, Gilgamesh). The blessing in Gen 27 is structured like the story to come, like a compendium: first, "bow down" (you nations): we'll see this with Joseph; secondly, "abundance": there will be famine again, an occasion for Joseph's complex story of "slavery/lordship;" finally, the blessing cannot be called back – "trembling of Isaac" (27.33: וַיֶּחֱרַד). cf. the unrecallable quality of the cursings and blessings proferred by Balam in Numbers.

Last remark: the story of Jacob is a very physical story of heels, soup, wealth, physical love, muscular struggles à la Gilgamesh/Enkidu, struggles human and divine? With Esau as another self?

The struggle in 32 occurs between these two human beings, two brothers. Two mirror images, as Cain and Abel were also. Failure in the case of the first pair, difficult negociation and inconclusive fight but ongoing life in the second case.

32.21 אכפרה פניו אולי ישא פני = I'll "cover his face," perhaps he'll lift mine. Notice that מנחה (=offering) is phonologically close to מחנה (=camp). Note also at the beginning of chapter 32, the angels or envoys of God and later those of Jacob. Jacob is imitating God in terms of "camps" (which he splits, like God's camps), of "envoys" (corresponding to divine messengers), and of blessing (which he gives to others, as God gives his to him).

32.23 מעבר יבוק passage of the Yabboq. The passage of a river is dangerous: whereas the desert or steppe doesn't have obvious borders (at least to the untutored eye or traveller), a river is clearly a boundary even to the inexperienced traveller. Yabboq sounds a little like Yaqov, but this cannot be forced. It definitely sounds like waya'abbeq.

32.24 ויאבק "he struggled." A man, a demon, the spirit of the river? This is at evening, another liminality. Or did Jacob fight Esau his brother, face to face, in the dark: another unsufficiently differentiated self? Who wins the wrestling match?

32.28 "Israel" – Sounds like שׂרת, but "Ya'aqov" is more of a struggling name.

32.29 "Your name." Compare to Moses's struggle with naming his invisible undifferentiated alter ego. Jacob doesn't get an answer but a blessing.

33.4 Meeting of Esau and Jacob: Esau sheds tears! A sort of river too on a parched landscape of unrequited or misunderstood affections and desires?

33.10 "to see your face is like seeing the face of God—"?? Compare the language using Elohim in the Moses-Aaron story ("You will be like an Elohim to Aaron…").

View of history

Now for the philosophy of history that one can dream up from this text. The reader observes a weakening of what passed for known, self- and once-revealed being: god(s) identifiable and localizable, worshippable and bankable. They could be used for political guarantees. Their temples, tithing, sacrificial systems, and scriptures, could be domesticated or taken advantage of by priesthoods and royal houses. Our story points to or towards something inherently weaker, limping, lacking assurance. Acquiring the means to control destiny, namely birthright, women and reproduction, capital, and finally land—though it is just marked by cultic stones, made palatable by yahwist apparitions to the hero, but still called Canaan in this fictional arrangement by an author or framer who is quite familiar with the end of both monarchies of Israel and Judah—, acquiring all of this can't be the center of one's devotion. I hope that this is what my imaginary ancient hearer/reader was thinking. By this I mean the fifth- or fourth-century BCE post-exilic reader, say in the late, Ezra-ic or post-Ezra period, in a tiny part of the vast Persian empire. My imaginary Judaean reader, in a small corner of the vast Eber-Naharaim satrapy, one of twenty-three, would be reading the latest installment of the struggles for survival of an ancestral Jacob as a story in which land, livestock, and reproduction of self have to be waged. Only through these repeated contractual arrangements with Esau, Laban, and the divine troll at the crossing of the stream, is there hope to get beyond trickery and reach something like the grace of a new morning, diminished, limping but alive, and more importantly not a twin or mirror

image anymore, but self-knowing and with a passable name, en route to something one could call one's home or land. A passable name, that is, an identifier and most ancient guarantee of the bona fide claim to ancestral lands that were now part of an immense empire.

In the longer span of history, however, very different interpretations may occur that suit new situations. The radical weakening of political control presented in such stories as Gen 22 and 32—the "binding of Isaac" scene, and Jacob at the Jabbok—cannot prevent the use of the same texts in modern times for justifications that lead to a harsher, absolute, and uncompromising type of land power.

References

Alter, Robert. 1996. *Genesis*. New York: W.W. Norton.