Lessons On Wrestling With The Unseen: Jacob At The Jabbok

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The story of Jacob's wrestling match at the ford of the Jabbok in Genesis 32:22-32 has excited interest and comment for centuries. The long history of interest in this passage testifies to the power with which it can speak to our own encounters with God. Thus comment and interpretation have continued apace in modern times. Approaches to the text have been tremendously diverse.

My own experience in teaching this text convinces me that, in spite of these many studies, the passage's possibilities for interpretation have by no means been exhausted. I therefore offer here yet another approach which begins by explaining some of its key aspects.

Some Thoughts On How To Approach The Text

In our study of Genesis 32 we will observe a threefold distinction among narration, story, and history. The narration is the words written on the page, or read or told aloud. The story is what the narration communicates. The history is a set of events in actual human experience to which the story relates, or is related to by the audience.

At the center of this configuration stands the story. This includes a sequence of events, the characters involved, the inner mental and emotional life of those characters, and the setting. All this is communicated by the narration, but in most cases the story is more than the sum of the parts of the narration so that communication is direct and explicit, as well as evocative and implicit. Thus the relation of story and narration is potentially quite complex and may involve the active participation of the audience in making explicit what is implicit.

The story is usually communicated not merely for its own sake (although this is also possible), but to speak of history, that is to say, actual people and events. These may be the people and events described in the story, or they may be people and events with which the audience is engaged. In either case, the story is the mid-point between the narration — the words of the text, and the history — the people and events about which
the teller of the story wishes to make a point. Just as the relations between narration and story may be complex, so too may the relations between story and history. A review of the possibilities, beginning with narration and story, will help.

In theory the same story may be narrated in different ways. In practice, however, changes in the narration often lead to changes in the story. In the case of two squabbling children, for example, the same incident is narrated differently to the inquiring parent precisely to create different versions of "the story." In any case, when dealing with biblical texts we already have before us a specific narration given in the text of Scripture.

The more significant possibility in the relation between narration and story is that the same narration may communicate different versions of the story depending on what parts of the narration are emphasized, or depending on the assumptions the reader brings to the narration. Linda Clark's sermon on Genesis 32:22-32 is an example of this. She offers two different versions of the story read from the single narration of this passage. Based on experiences at different times of her life, she first identifies with the character of Jacob and hears the story from his point of view, and later identifies with the characters of Jacob's wives and children whom he makes cross ahead of him and hears the story from their point of view. The resulting versions of the story are very different although the narration (the text) is identical.

In the history of interpretation of Genesis 32:22-32 Jewish and some Christian interpreters come to very different views of what the story is and means depending on how they answer the question of who Jacob's opponent is. In each case the difference lies not in the words being read, but the story that the narration is understood to communicate. The decisive factor in each case is a set of theological assumptions the interpreter brings to the text.

The relation between story and history can be equally complex. A story is certainly capable of being related to, and speaking of, the set of events described by the story itself. It is also capable of being related to, and addressing, a completely different set of events that nevertheless are part of the audience's current experience. To the extent that the story is intended to address one set of events or the other, the way it is told will be affected. One need only think of our example of the two squabbling children to see this. The dominant real-life situation that will shape the telling of their stories will not be the squabble itself (now in the past), but the situation in which they are speaking to the parent, who has the power to punish the one who initiated the squabble. Just so biblical narratives may speak of the past to address the writer's and audience's present. In such cases the way the story is narrated will be affected by the needs of that present situation as much as by the past events which are its subject matter.
The effect of such considerations on the interpretation of a biblical text can again be illustrated with interpretations of our passage. Claus Westermann focuses on the relation of the text to the events and persons described in the story, and uses this as the means for discriminating between the original report and later additions. As a result he finds a story focused only on Jacob and his own power that wrests a blessing (more power) from the demon that guards the ford. Gerhard von Rad, on the other hand, understands a sovereign and gracious God as the main actor and - intimately connected with that view - concludes that Genesis 32:22-32 is not so much concerned with Jacob's personal history as with Israel's later experience with God.

Again and again in the relationships among narration, story, and history, the decisive factor is an element often neglected in contemporary biblical exegesis — the audience. The audience puts together the mental pictures of the story out of the narration. The audience relates that story to history. The choices the audience makes in these processes, as our examples have shown, go a long way towards determining the meaning received from the text. This is not coincidental.

Biblical stories are often narrated in such a way that they invite, and — in some cases — require, the audience's involvement in completing the meaning of the text. Here the narration does not tell all, but rather evokes a response from the audience that contributes to the final story communicated by the text. Several examples will suffice to illustrate this point.

The unanswered question at the end of the book of Jonah is one such. That question is the question of the book, but no answer from Jonah is narrated. Only the audience can answer it, and the book has been constructed to present just that question to the audience for an answer. Until the audience gets involved and answers the question, the book's meaning is incomplete.

In a different way, Jeremiah regularly uses rhetorical questions to obtain his audience's assent to, and ownership of, ideas upon which he then builds arguments that the audience would be less likely to accept at face value. The evoking of the audience's participation is an essential element in the attempt to persuade people of views they did not hold.

Robert Alter points out how biblical narratives employ a variety of ways to depict the motives behind the behavior of characters. These often are designed to evoke from the audience a judgment about the character's motives without which the message of the story would be incomplete. God's testing of Abraham by demanding the sacrifice of Isaac, and God's resisting Balaam's journey to Moab after God had told Balaam to go there are two instances where silence about the motives of a provocative action of God evokes a significant involvement from the audience in determining what the story is about.
For all the excellent work that has been done on Genesis 32:22-32, a major area of investigation that has been overlooked is this matter of the way the text puts the audience to work and guides the audience in that involvement. Many interpreters note degrees of ambiguity and obscurity in the text; a few notice how this evokes the audience’s involvement, but none pursues systematically how this interaction with the audience works to unfold the story.¹¹

Our basic exegetical practice here will be to pay close attention to the literary construction of the text, emphasizing the interaction with the audience. In other words, we will examine closely the way the text’s narration involves the audience in the process of working out the story, and what effect that has on the meaning and impact of the story. Our objective is to see what the story can tell us about our encounters with God. Thus we will be interested finally in uncovering theology rather than recovering historical facts, and we will be interested far more in the relation of the story to the history of its audience than the history of the characters it describes. So the first part of this study will probe the story that this text unfolds for us. The second part will reflect on what it has to say about its audience’s history at two points in the history of Israel, and finally at this point in our history with God.

The Relation of Narration and Story in Genesis 32:22-32

An audience encounters Genesis 32:22-32 as part of a continuous narrative. Thus the audience will bring to the reading of this text information and expectations gleaned from the preceding passages. We begin with a review of some of that information. Jacob has left Laban and is continuing his journey towards Canaan when he is met by “angels (messengers) of God” (32:1). He concludes that he has stumbled on “the camp of God” (32:2), and names the place “Two Camps” (Hebrew: mahānāyim, usually transposed to “Mahanaim”) because there appear to be two camps there, his and God’s.

This brief meeting at “Two Camps/Mahanaim” (only two verses!), however, plays a crucial role in setting the scene for what follows. Michael Fishbane has called attention to the paralleling of Jacob’s encounter with God at Bethel, and the events recounted in Genesis 32 within the structure of the Jacob stories as a whole.¹² The specific language of 32:1-2 signals this to the reader with great clarity. In both stories Jacob meets “angels of God” (32:1 and 28:12, mal ʾelōhîm — the only two occurrences of the phrase with this meaning). The verb for meeting is the same in both stories (32:1 and 28:11, pāgāc ). In both stories there is reference to Jacob being “on the way” (32:1, hālakh leḏarkō; 28:20, badderekh . . . hōleh),
and in both stories Jacob names the place using a virtually identical formula.\(^3\)

Thus the language of the text signals a correspondence between Bethel and Mahanaim. At Bethel we watched Jacob’s transition out of the land; now at Mahanaim the narration warns us that we are witnessing his transition back into the land. At Bethel, Jacob was fleeing Esau from whom he had stolen the blessing. As Jacob went into exile from the land, God confirmed that the promise of the land was indeed his. Now at Mahanaim he returns from exile apparently at divine command (31:13) — as he must if the promise is to have reality (otherwise exile from the land might also mean exile from the promise), but he must now face Esau. Thus existentially — if not quite geographically — we are at the point in the journey that corresponds to Bethel. One thing is missing, however. God has not appeared to Jacob at Mahanaim.

The narration never reports Jacob’s movement from Mahanaim, so it is there at “Two Camps” that he initiates contact with Esau. Having been met by God’s “messengers,” he sends messengers to Esau. They report that Esau is coming with four hundred men. The narrator then informs the audience (32:8) that Jacob is very afraid (a fact Jacob affirms in his prayer [32:12] even as he tries to mask for whom he is afraid).

From this point on Jacob’s actions become a string of tricks to avoid a face to face confrontation with Esau. First, Jacob splits the people and cattle with him into two camps — a move he openly describes as a trick. Next, he prays to God to save him. There is a specifically manipulative aspect to the prayer revealed by a comparison of 32:9 with 28:15 and 31:13 (the promises to which Jacob appeals). God promises to be “with” Jacob (28:15), but Jacob repeats that as a promise to “do you good.” So Jacob tries covertly to redefine the promise to which he is holding God. Finally, in his anxiety Jacob decides to send a gift (Hebrew: minhāh) to Esau. Fokkelmann has analyzed brilliantly how the arrangement and use of the gift, instead of effecting a “face-to-face” reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, gets in the way and becomes the means of avoiding that face-to-face meeting.\(^4\) This too is a trick by which Jacob hopes to retain blessing without really dealing with Esau.

This sequence of successive tricks only serves to show Jacob’s increasing anxiety. Given the plain declaration of his fear, the recital of defensive measures without indication of their effect heightens the suspense for the reader. Brueggemann calls attention to the way the slow pace of the narration forces the audience to wait with Jacob for the outcome, thus increasing tension.\(^5\) It is in this state of tension and terror, in a place of great portent for Jacob’s future, a place fraught with the possibility of encounter with God, that our story in Genesis 32:22-32 begins.
Then he got up in the night and took his two wives and his two concubines and his eleven sons and made them cross the Jabbok ford. He took them and made them cross the river and he made whatever was his cross. Jacob was left quite alone and some human wrestled with him until the coming of the dawn, and one saw that they were unable to prevail against the other and one struck the hollow of the other's hip. (Who could not prevail against whom, and who struck whose hip? Jacob or the opponent?) And Jacob's hip joint was dislocated while wrestling with the other, and one said, "Let me go for the dawn is coming," and the other said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Who asked to be let go, and who demanded a blessing as the price of release? Jacob or the opponent?) And one said to the other, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob."

As the audience proceeds through the text, the narration leaves them in the dark about who does what to whom. Jacob wrestles with his opponent; the audience wrestles with the text. Jacob wrestles in the dead of night when you cannot see your hand before your face, and the text keeps the audience equally in the dark. For the audience, however, the wrestling match consists precisely in not knowing and trying to find out. It is a struggle to know.

In order to perceive correctly the effect of this device, however, it is critical that we not read ahead of ourselves. Most interpreters resolve all the ambiguities on the basis of the outcome (i.e., v. 27). That, like reading the last chapter of a murder mystery, drains the device of its rhetorical power. As the audience proceeds through the text it does not yet have the benefit of the outcome, and so must wrestle with the ambiguity. Now we turn to the specifics of this wrestling.

On the question of who cannot prevail and uses a trick blow, we observe that if Jacob cannot prevail and tries a trick blow, then his trick rebounds upon himself, since his thigh is dislocated. If the opponent cannot prevail and tries the trick blow, the trick is successful, and Jacob is held at a disadvantage just the same.

The larger context of the preceding accounts about Jacob prepares the audience for either reading. Throughout these narratives Jacob is a man of tricks. His life's course is determined by tricks. He tricks his brother Esau out of his birthright; he tricks Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau; he tricks Laban out of a substantial amount of wealth. He also suffers a trick when Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel and so extorts seven more years of labor from Jacob. However, as Jacob escapes Esau's anger at being tricked, he also escapes the consequences of Laban's trick by his own counter-trick to acquire Laban's flocks. By craft and guile Jacob takes control of whatever situation he is in, and wrests from it blessing, or the substance of blessing.
If, in our text, it is Jacob who uses the trick blow, then for the first time his trick has not succeeded. For the first time the consequence of his trick rebounds and strikes him. This time Jacob is unable to escape the consequences of his trick. If, in our text, it is the opponent who successfully uses the trick, then we have the irony of the trickster being tricked, and the threat that this time—left without a counter-trick—he will not be able to evade the dreadful results. In either case, he has lost control of the situation.

On that note we turn to the matter of who wants to leave and who demands the blessing as the price of release. At this point in the text interpreters (and translators!) again and again read the text from back to front. That is to say, they read the dialogue about release and blessing from the standpoint of its conclusion when we know who asked what, and so they never raise this question about who wants release and who wants blessing.\(^{18}\) Thereby they miss a critical aspect of the text’s meaning.

Until Jacob utters his name (v. 27), the matter is very much in question. In the course of the actual dialogue to that point, it is unclear who asked to be released and who sought a blessing.\(^{19}\) Of course, the opponent may well be the one who requests release. Jacob then uses the opportunity for another trick, an attempt to extort blessing.\(^{20}\) I submit, however, that the narration takes us in another direction.

Who is at a material disadvantage? Not the opponent, but Jacob. Consider 32:25b-26a again, “and Jacob’s hip joint was dislocated while wrestling with the other, and one said, ‘Let me go for the dawn is coming.’” Jacob’s wounding is the event that immediately precedes the request for release. The information that the audience possesses at the moment of reading this leads to the conclusion that Jacob now requests release because he cannot prevail with a wounded leg.

The motivation found in the phrase “the dawn is coming,” is susceptible to several interpretations depending on which data are drawn from the context. It might be a hint to the opponent that with the coming of light the people on the other side of the river will see and come to Jacob’s aid. It might reflect Jacob’s desire to be alone again before the dawn breaks and he loses the opportunity for a vision of God such as he received at Bethel. It might reflect Jacob’s anxiety to be free of this opponent before daylight and the feared arrival of Esau. Any of these interpretations makes the request appear reasonable to the audience, given the information the text supplies. Whether those motivations would be persuasive to Jacob’s opponent is not the issue; they are plausible for the character of Jacob as portrayed to this point in the story.

If Jacob asks for release, then it is the opponent that asks blessing as the price of that release. Here lies the heart of the text, for Jacob carries two significant blessings, the one Isaac intended for Esau (Genesis 27:27-
29), and the one conferred by God at Bethel (Gen. 28:13-15). Both endow Jacob and his descendants with the land of Canaan. God’s blessing reiterates the promises to Abraham, and so places Jacob in the line of succession moving towards the fulfillment of those promises. Because of these blessings there is point to Jacob’s return to Canaan since the land is granted him and his descendants. Because of these blessings there is point to Jacob’s return to the land of Abraham’s sojournings since in him—Jacob—the grand enterprise of redemption God began with Abraham will continue.

Nevertheless, as Westermann observes elsewhere, blessings can be snatched from those for whom they are intended. As Jacob cornered Esau into abandoning the birthright, so the opponent tries to corner Jacob into abandoning the blessing. As Jacob tricked Isaac out of the blessing, so the opponent tries to trick Jacob out of it.

If the blessing is now taken from Jacob, for him as for Esau (Gen. 27:34-37) there will be none left. In the stranger’s price for Jacob’s release the whole promise of God is at stake—the whole nation of Israel, the whole people of faith, the whole enterprise of redemption. In the stranger’s demand the existence of the ancient audience itself as God’s faithful and elect people is at stake.

A pattern in the language of this text affirms this understanding. The Hebrew of Jacob’s name is ya Ch’qob, the river’s name is yabbO’q, and the verb for “wrestle” is :Jabaq, so Jacob’s name is echoed and emphasized throughout our text. Jacob was given his name because he emerged from the womb grabbing his brother’s heel, trying to pull Esau back so he could come out first and gain the inheritance. Jacob was “Heelgrabber.” Heelgrabber grabbed the birthright, grabbed the blessing, and at Laban’s house grabbed the substance of blessing. Now, it seems, Heelgrabber’s blessing is about to be grabbed from him.

At Bethel, as Jacob fled Esau’s rage and left the land of the promise for exile with Laban, God appeared to Jacob and confirmed that the blessing stolen from Esau was indeed Jacob’s. At the Jabbok as Jacob returns to the land whose gift is intertwined with that blessing—as he must return if he is to claim the fullness of God’s promise—this human assailant threatens to strip Jacob of the blessing that was given at his departing, the blessing that gives meaning to the return.

For us this realization of what is really at stake here comes home only after study and explanation. For an ancient Israelite audience it would have come home intuitively. It is not necessary that this be the only reading of these verses, however. It is sufficient that it be a possible and likely reading up to the point before the giving of Jacob’s name—as indeed it is—because then the audience would wonder if that was what was at stake.
The next turn of the dialogue, "and he said to him, 'What's your name?'", gives enough time for the audience to consider these possibilities—enough time for the tension to build in the audience over which is the right way to understand this narration, over whether the blessing is really at risk, and whether it will survive the risk. Imagine the release and relief as the rest of the line emerges, "and he said, 'Jacob.'" This is where the power of this text lies! Here is where its heart is to be found. This is why it was told again and again.

This text was not valued because it explained the name Israel, or the name Penuel, or why Israelites did not eat certain portions of meat. This passage of Scripture was not preserved because it explained some names, but because it named an existential crisis—the uncertainty and insecurity of not knowing what is happening to us, and therefore of not knowing whether we risk losing God's blessing, risk losing our way.

The narrative itself carries the real punch and power of this text. If that is so, what is the role of the namings, and the explanation about the thigh portion? What is the role of the by-play in which Jacob asks his opponent's name? If they do not do the main work of the text, why are they here?

The answer is already contained in the very fact that these aspects of the text attract enough attention that we feel bound to ask those questions. These things catch and draw our attention to specific aspects of the story that the narration emphasizes. They draw our attention to elements that clarify what went on in the encounter, so that just as Jacob sees clearly in the sun's light as he leaves the ford, we—as we leave the text—see clearly just what happened there.

The deflection of Jacob's request for his opponent's name in v. 29 leads the audience to conclude two things. Since the request for a name in the Old Testament is a request for identity and therefore for a measure of control, Jacob once again seeks a trick by which to control the situation. The deflection of Jacob's gambit through the question, "Why do you ask my name?" means the final defeat of Jacob's attempts at control by means of his tricks. The deflection of the request for a name also hints at the real identity of Jacob's opponent, calling to mind the freedom of God in the face of another request for God's name in the wilderness of Sinai in front of a burning bush. Thus the audience is prepared for the truth of Jacob's claim that he has encountered God.

The change of Jacob's name to Israel does not so much create, as it recognizes, a transformation that our hero undergoes in the course of this tale. He moves from the one who grabs to the one who endures, from the one who tricks to the one who perseveres. Since Jacob's tricks are defeated, to whatever extent he prevails on his own ability, it is only by sheer endurance. Indeed the verb in v. 28 translated "you have prevailed,"
could be translated, "you have endured," or "you have shown the ability to endure."

Viewed from the knowledge that Jacob's opponent was God, the declaration that Jacob has prevailed seems strange since there is no way that a human could prevail by sheer ability. Indeed, the history of manuscript transmission of the last half of Genesis 32:28 shows that the notion of a human being prevailing over the deity has been a very uncomfortable thought for many. I am persuaded that the text means to be precise at this point, however. To say that Jacob "prevailed" in this wrestling match with God, is to say that God let him prevail. The positive outcome of this business for Jacob is due as much to a gracious divine providence as to Jacob's perseverance.

The naming of the ford Peniel/Penuel ("God's face"), found in Genesis 32:30, is less significant as an explanation of the ford's name than as emphasizing what had really happened to Jacob, namely, that in an encounter with a human he had actually encountered God. Jacob had no control over this; God had appeared at God's initiative. Jacob was not aware of this in the course of the wrestling; he grappled with a human for all he knew. It was only afterward, as he left the encounter, that he could say that in wrestling with the human he had encountered the divine.

Four patterns in the immediate context show that this incarnational aspect of the text is a major theme here. In Genesis 32:1 Jacob is met by angels, messengers of God, and in 32:3 he sends messengers to meet Esau. In Genesis 32:2 Jacob declares this place to be the "camp of God," but names it "Two Camps," pointing to another camp besides the divine one —namely, the human camp of Jacob, which in fact becomes "two camps." In Genesis 32:13-21 Jacob assembles a present for Esau that is designated a minhāh, a term also used for offerings to God. In Genesis 32:30 Jacob speaks of having seen God face to face, while in 33:10 Jacob says to Esau, "I have seen your face, like seeing the face of God." The whole context is shot through with this overlapping of the human and the divine.

This incarnational perspective is not unique in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Ruth, apparently composed at roughly the same time as this text, clearly sees that God's work is effected through human work. God is declared to be the author of what befalls Naomi, but the deeds that effect the good outcome for Naomi are all entirely within the realm of human actions and motivation.

Genesis 32:32, which links Jacob's wound to the prohibition against eating the sciatic muscle, serves less to explain the gastronomic practice than to call attention to Jacob's wound. In verse 31 this wound was said to cause him to limp. Thus the conclusion of the narration emphasizes that
Jacob’s encounter cost him something. It impaired him; he limps as he crosses the ford.

Jacob’s crossing of the ford is the final marker of his transformation, the final marker of the significance of his encounter. Our text opened with Jacob putting wives, concubines, children, and all his possessions over the river ahead of him. The text emphasizes that Jacob made everything cross, and remained alone.

Why did he do that? What does it mean that he did that? We are not told, but as the audience we are left to draw our own conclusions. Which conclusion we will draw again depends on which data in the context we emphasize. Remembering the parallel with Bethel, we may conclude that Jacob seeks deliberately to isolate himself in order to experience a vision as he did at Bethel, a clear and manifest response of God to Jacob’s prayer for help. Remembering the series of defensive measures in 32:7-21, we may conclude that this is Jacob’s last trick. In his manifest fear, he uses others as a shield and puts, not just a gift between him and Esau, but everything Jacob has. This is ironic because those wives, children, and possessions are the tangible evidence of Jacob’s blessing, so that once again the matter of blessing has come between Jacob and Esau. There is further irony in the fact that Jacob now puts the evidence of blessing at risk by his own fear in putting his household where the river is no longer a barrier for Esau. Remembering Jacob’s fear of Esau in 32:7, we may conclude that Jacob hung back because he was afraid of the crossing, afraid of the transition. He had used up his tricks, and now could only endure. Perhaps he did not cross because he could not yet endure the confrontation with Esau.

Jacob’s isolation that night at the Jabbok is really paradigmatic of his situation among humans. Jacob’s treating the human beings of his household like the “things” he owns when he puts “whatever was his” across the river so that he is left alone mirrors the way he has treated all the other humans in his life. He has tricked them, manipulated them for his purposes, used them like things, and avoided confronting and grappling with them face to face.

At all points Jacob’s nighttime encounter produces change, change that allows him to cross, to make the transition. Jacob’s human craft and guile that have isolated him are met by the same. His tricks are defeated; Jacob is forced to wrestle with the other and to persevere in the encounter, so he is prepared to endure the confrontation with Esau. Jacob’s isolation is decisively broken down. Another human being breaks into his isolation, and wrestles with him inescapably. In the end Jacob is driven to the realization that the wrestling with this guileful, crafty human was the encounter with God that he had sought. The marks of this encounter with
the divine through wrestling with the human are that Jacob is changed and blessed, but he is also wounded and marked by that limp.

Often we seek to resolve into one of its two poles the tension between the obtaining of blessing by human diligence and craft ("God helps those who help themselves"), and the receipt of blessing from miraculous divine providence ("God will provide"). Our tale of Jacob's wrestling at the Jabbok brings into sharp focus that this is not an either/or situation, but an interplay between human guile and divine grace as the means to secure blessing. There is a measure of grace in the fact that Jacob emerges from the encounter with blessing. At the same time, the divine grace that meets and transforms Jacob comes to him cloaked entirely in the human craft and guile of Jacob's opponent, so that one cannot turn reliance on grace into its own trick. We are turned away from simple solutions, and forced into the ambiguities of wrestling with the unseen God — who is free.

The Relation of Story and History

In Biblical Times

As we have examined this story and its narration, we have seen how the text repeatedly and forcefully moves the audience to identify with Jacob, and involves the audience at a crucial point of their own existential concern. This suggests that for this story the critical relation to history is to the history of the audience, not that of the characters. Ultimately this history of the audience must become our history, but as a guide for our use of this text to reflect on our history, I want first to speak of how the text would have related to the history of two earlier, Israelite audiences.

The first audience is that of the time of the written composition of the Jabbok text in substantially its present form, apparently during the reign of Solomon. As 2 Samuel 14-1 Kings 2 (especially 1 Kings 1-2) makes clear, the succession from David to Solomon was quite uncertain. From the point of view of Solomon's court, the whole enterprise of God's chosen people of faith, the blessing experienced by David's kingdom, had been very much at risk. There were religious authorities involved on all sides so that there was no clear-cut "choice of God." The matter was very much in the dark, very much a guileful and crafty struggle between competitors for the throne (e.g., 1 Kings 1), and yet in the end the claim was made that divine providence worked through this (1 Kings 3:6-7). This seems new since previously claims for the working of divine providence in the selection of a king (Saul and David) had been accompanied by divine revelation and prophetic acts of anointing — very much acts of divine grace without the involvement of human guile and craft. Moreover, as in our text, the successful party in the succession to Solomon should have lost according to the claims of primogeniture. Our story thus mirrors Israel's experience in the years just before its writing, and seems to serve the purpose
of affirming that—in spite of appearances—this indeed was God’s way with Israel.

The other audience I want to focus on is Judah after its exile to Babylon (the incorporation of this text—with others—into the final form of the Pentateuch). This is the real fireworks display. In 587 B.C.E. Jerusalem had been sacked, the temple razed, the nation decapitated by the exile of the leadership classes. All tangible evidence of blessing was gone. The promise was now an apparently failed promise. There was real questioning going on as to whether God had abandoned the whole enterprise.

This time everything was at risk. The whole enterprise of faith was very much in jeopardy. Human guile, human craft and skill had been to no avail; they had come to an end of their ability to secure blessing. The future was unknown; God’s presence and activity were very hard to see. The nation had prayed for God’s salvation, and got stuck wrestling humans. Nevertheless, Israel finally emerged from the exile transformed, blessed, saved, wounded—limping, and concluded that it had been dealing all the time with God even though it was the Babylonians who were their wrestling opponents. Looking back they could see divine grace at work in all the human guile and craft, even to the extent that it was an edict of Cyrus the Persian that freed them, not some stunningly miraculous intervention of divine grace.

Thus at a time when Israel had barely survived obliteration and the whole future had been on the line, this text called attention to those human means by which God had blessed those who had persevered face-to-face when all guile and craft were exhausted and empty.

**In Our Time**

Situations of transition and change, situations when blessing is in danger of being lost, situations when the enterprise of faith is at risk of perishing, situations of seeking to establish control over a threatening situation and failing, situations of wrestling in the dark of not knowing, are all addressed by this text. It seems to me out of my own experience of ministry that it still speaks to them quite powerfully. Instead of enumerating specific situations of this sort—something the reader can do as well as I—I shall select one or two aspects of the text that offer us particularly useful insights.

Genesis 32 offers substantial insight into God’s incarnational presence with God’s people. This text and the Book of Ruth make clear that while Jesus Christ may represent the definitive incarnation of divine grace (and so is unique), he is not the exclusive incarnation (i.e., incarnation *per se* does not constitute his uniqueness).

This observation has enormously useful consequences. It is all too easy to be misled by all the biblical accounts of supernatural miracles, and to
assume that that is the dominant, or even the only, pattern of encounter with God. Such occurrences have an air of certainty about them that is seductive—because the event is extraordinary, God must be behind it. This assumption may result, however, in people feeling inadequate in their spirituality because they do not experience this kind of “direct” spiritual encounter. The story of Jacob’s wrestling suggests that there is ample opportunity for encounter with the unseen God hidden in our wrestlings with the ordinary and mundane—especially at points of transition and crisis. This perspective offers less certainty about the encounter than the other, but it does suggest that we may be camped at a reasonable location after all.

In addition to validating the only kind of spirituality that seems open to many of us, this text puts a different light on the psychological and organizational wisdom that real growth and resolution come not from avoidance of confrontation, but by serious and persistent wrestling with the human beings involved. This text suggests that not to persevere in wrestling things through to a resolution is not merely to miss the possibility of human growth, but to miss the possibility of divine grace. Not gimmicks, but perseverance in the struggle to a resolution thus becomes a key virtue, not only in human growth as individuals and/or groups, but in achieving an encounter with God.

I have found this to be true not only of individuals, but of congregations as well. This Jabbok text points to the communities that grapple with their human differences, and are seriously wrestling with the world in which they are enmeshed, as those that will be spiritually alive, and that will find themselves encountering God with any regularity. Those who seek various ways to avoid the wrestling match with the humans within or without their community will become spiritually impoverished.

As with Jacob’s wrestling, so with ours, we will not be able to see that it is an encounter with the unseen God, but there are marks that will identify it after the fact: transformation, blessing, and a wound.

This text also opens up a valuable perspective on biblical interpretation. An enduring problem for a theological understanding of what goes on in biblical interpretation is posed by the contrast between the clear humanity of the biblical texts and the church’s faith and experience that they are also God’s Word. The difficulty through the centuries has been to find a way of understanding how these dual affirmations about Scripture relate without at the same time slighting one or the other.29

Jacob’s wrestling match at the Jabbok provides an answer to this. What we do in biblical exegesis is to grapple as human beings—I hope with all the craft we can muster—with some well-crafted human texts. That is all we can control; that is all we can do. We have no control over God’s revelatory activity in these texts just as Jacob had no ability to
compel God's revelation to him. God is free; the Holy Spirit's work of revelation is purely a matter of divine grace. By the same token, we encounter that grace purely through the wrestling with the humanity of the text and ourselves. There is no way that we can simply plug God's gracious self-revelation through that human wrestling into our method as this or that step. God acts as God wills, but we are in a position to receive what God may reveal only if we persevere in our wrestling with the text. As at the Jabbok, tricks and short-cuts bring not blessing, but emptiness and isolation.

Here then are the signs of healthy and productive biblical interpretation that lead to a real encounter with God's Word, far beyond any rigor about methods, criteria, and hermeneutics: that we truly wrestle with the text, and we persist to the end in grappling with it, and through it with ourselves and our world; that we will know that under and through all the humanity of our interaction with the text we have been met by the unseen God when we come away from the encounter changed, blessed, and also wounded.

ENDNOTES

1 In Gen. 32 the verse numbers for the Hebrew text are always one higher than for the English text. Thus Gen. 32:22-32 in an English translation is Gen. 32:23-33 in the Hebrew. English verse numbers will be used for citations in this article.

2 The earliest reference to the incident outside of Genesis is found in Hos. 12:4-5. The very full history of interpretation of Gen. 32:22-32 in both Jewish and Christian traditions before the modern era is reviewed and analyzed in William T. Miller, *Mysteries Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok* (Brown Judaic Studies, 50; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1984), 97-138.


Miller, Mysterious Encounters, 97-138.

This is clear from Westermann’s argument that vv. 28-29 are a later addition because they presuppose the existence of Israel as a people which would not have been the case for the original narrative. This assumes that the original narrative relates only to Jacob’s own history since only before the Exodus did Israel not exist as a people. (Westermann, Genesis 12-36, 518.)

Von Rad, Genesis, 320.


The vigorous discussions these texts provoke when I teach them continually reaffirm for me that they are designed to force the audience to examine the question of what God might be up to in such a situation, and then what God might be up to in their own lives in similar situations.

See, for example: Brueggemann, Genesis, 266-7; Fokkelmann, Narrative Art, 209, 213; Miller, Mysterious Encounters, 102; Von Rad, Genesis, 317, 319.


See also Fokkelmann, Narrative Art, 198.

Fokkelmann, Narrative Art, 207-208.

Brueggemann, Genesis, 263. See also Fokkelmann, Narrative Art, 201; and Westermann, Genesis 12-26, 504.

Although is is used heavily in biblical Hebrew for male human beings, there is ample evidence — e.g., in legal formulae — for its use to designate an individual person regardless of gender. It seems to be the word typically used for an individual whereas adam (humanity) seems to be used more as a collective. The use of is in our text emphasizes only two things: the humanity of Jacob’s opponent, and that Jacob’s opponent was a single individual. Inasmuch as the text seems to want to avoid any further specificity, “human” seems the best translation.

The Hebrew text of vv. 24-27 does not specify who does what to whom, using only identical pronouns to designate the various subjects and objects. These pronouns could
be rendered literally ("he," "him," etc.), but I have used "the one," "the other," to accent just how obscure and non-specific the Hebrew is.


Westermann indeed treats precisely this ambiguity as a serious exegetical problem to be overcome rather than a possible device of the narrator (Westermann, *Genesis 12-26*, 517).

Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 268; Von Rad, *Genesis*, 316; Westermann, *Genesis 12-26*, 517-518. Traditional Jewish exegesis has remarked on this too. See the summary in Miller, *Mysterious Encounters*, 103-104.


The great medieval Jewish commentator Rashi in his comment on Gen. 32:27, although he does not consider the possibility that the stranger might be asking for the blessing, clearly understands that it is the blessing stolen from Esau that is at stake. Gerhard von Rad (*Genesis*, 318) agrees with Elliger to similar effect.

Rashi's comment on Gen. 32:29 begins, "One will not say any more that blessings have come to you [i.e., Jacob] by guile and deception, but by authority and openness of face."

There are two main patterns for avoiding a meaning of the verse that has a human being prevailing over God: either Jacob's opponent is identified as an angel (Aramaic translations and Jewish exegetical tradition [Miller, *Mysterious Encounters*, 99-114]), or the verse is read so as to associate Jacob's prevailing with human beings and not with God (Greek and Latin translations). This embarrassment is not limited to the ancients; note Westermann, *Genesis 12-26*, 518.

So also von Rad (*Genesis*, 317).

Based on ascribing Gen. 32:22-32 to the J document (see note 28), conventionally assigned a Solomonic date, and following Campbell's suggestion that the origins of the book of Ruth are Solomonic (Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* [Anchor Bible, 7; Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1975], 28).


Assigning the entire text to the J document following von Rad (*Genesis*, 315) against Westermann (*Genesis 12-36*, 514, 520-521).