

Genesis 32-33 – Jacob and Esau Reunite

Review

In Genesis 31, we saw that God called Jacob to return to his homeland of Canaan after twenty years serving his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram. Jacob left Haran in secret, but Laban learned of his departure three days later and pursued him for seven days, catching up with Jacob and his family in the hill country of Gilead. After an initial squabble, the two men constructed a heap of stones and made a covenant that neither of them would pass beyond the heap to bring harm to the other.

Jacob Continues Toward Canaan

After parting ways with Laban, Jacob and his family continued their journey down from the hill country of Gilead toward the River Jordan.

¹*Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God* [מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים *mal'āk 'ēlōhîm*] *met him.*

²*And when Jacob saw them he said, “This is God’s camp!” So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.* [מַחֲנַיִם *maḥānayim* – two camps] Genesis 32:1-2 (ESV)

Recall from our previous study that we looked in some detail at the phrase מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים *mal'āk 'ēlōhîm* which was translated in Genesis 31:11 as “*the angel of God*.” Here in Genesis 32:1 we find the same phrase; except this time it is plural as it was in Genesis 28:12 when Jacob dreamt he saw the *angels of God* ascending and descending on a ladder leading up from Earth to Heaven. Recall from that story that Jacob saw in his dream multiple angels ascending and descending upon the stairway while the LORD (יְהוָה *Y'ḥōvâ*) stood above it.

ASIDE –English language translators correctly render מַלְאָכֵי *mal'āk* as singular (angel) in some cases and translate מַלְאָכֵי *mal'āk* as plural (angels) in other cases despite the noun lacking the usual ים -*im* suffix that distinguishes plural nouns in Hebrew. The grammatical reason has to do with the inflections of the noun and its associated verbs. Hebrew – like many languages (including English) – uses word suffixes to make a distinction between plural and singular subjects – ‘angel’ or ‘angels’ in this case. English lacks this precision for many of its verbs including ‘to meet.’ So, in English, it is correct to say both ‘the *angel* of God met...’ and ‘the *angels* of God met...’ Most languages also add suffixes to nouns to indicate singular or plural. However, some nouns lack these. For example, in English ‘you’ can be either singular or plural. Hence, we have the workarounds *y’all* and *yous* to make the distinction. In the case of the Hebrew phrase מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים *mal'āk 'ēlōhîm*, when the phrase refers to one single angel of God, the noun מַלְאָכֵי *mal'āk* has no suffix. But when the phrase indicates multiple angels, מַלְאָכֵי *mal'āk* is written with the י *yod* suffix to indicate the plural ‘angels.’

You may rightly point out that אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* is a plural noun in both cases (as indicated in Hebrew by adding the ים -*im* suffix). This plural noun most often represents the triune God – Father, Son, and Spirit. Although it is indeed a plural noun, it is usually associated with a singular verb in Hebrew to emphasize the three-in-one nature of the Trinity. This word אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* is most often rendered simply as ‘God’ in our English translations. Most of them also capitalize it to emphasize its reference to the one true and living God.

Sometimes though, we find אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* translated into English as ‘gods’ (not capitalized). In most of these cases (where אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* refers to idols), אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* is the object of a preposition and has no associated verb. In cases where אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* is the subject of a sentence, the associated verb has a plural inflection, and the context also makes it clear that אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm* is referring to false gods (uncapitalized in English) rather than the one true God. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Aaron’s blasphemous declaration to the Israelites after he cast the two golden calves.

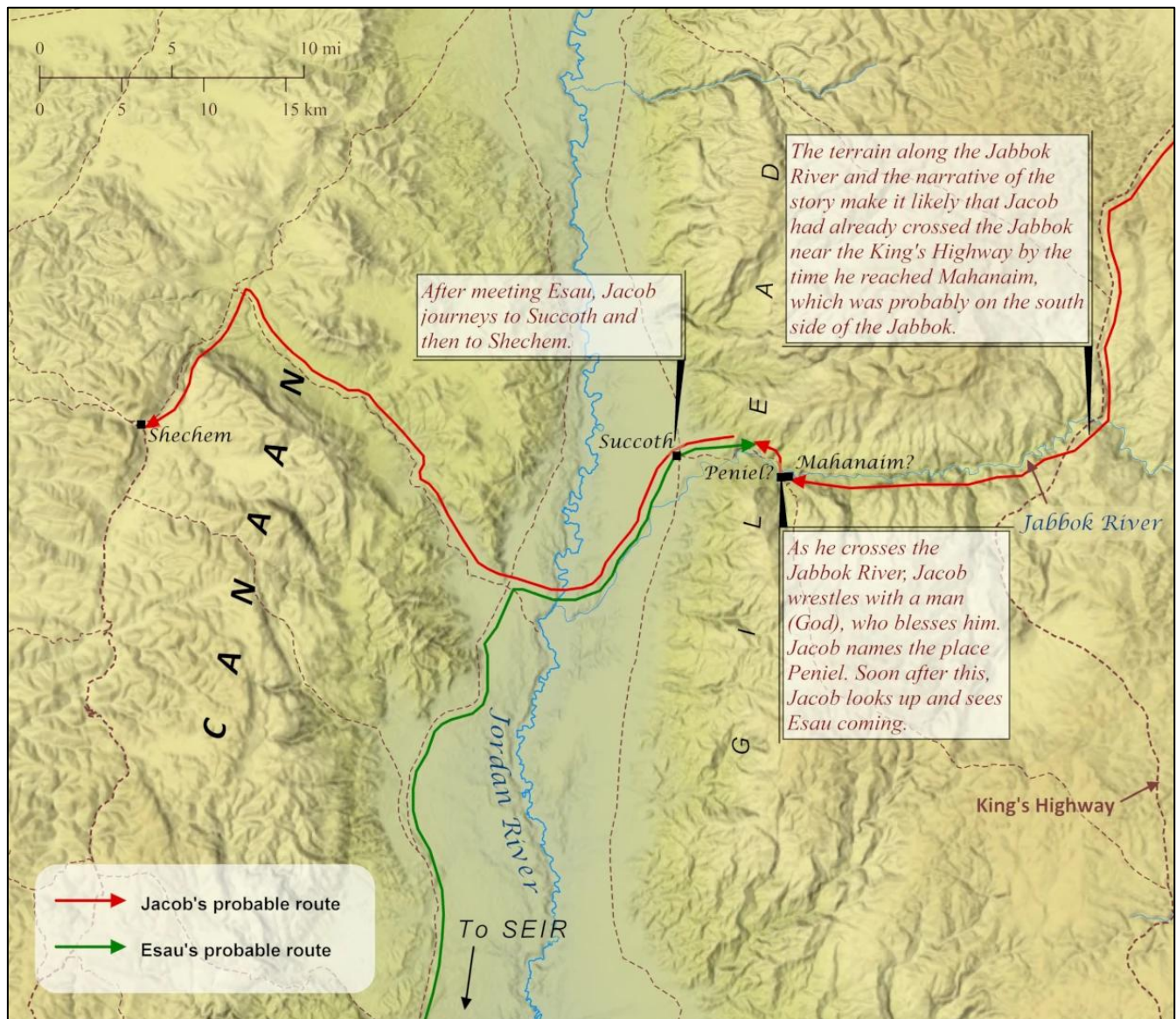
...‘These are your gods [אֱלֹהִים *'ēlōhîm*], *O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’* Exodus 32:8b (ESV)

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Here in Genesis 32:1 and elsewhere in God's Word where we encounter the phrase מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm**, the word אֱלֹהִים **'ēlōhîm** is a possessive adjective translated into English as *'of God.'* Therefore, the number inflection of the verb of the sentence in these cases is not relevant to מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים **'ēlōhîm** but applies instead to מַלְאֲכֵי **mal'āk**.

While the grammatical reasons that מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** is sometimes translated as *'angels of God'* and other times translated *'angel of God'* are intriguing, the actual distinction between the singular מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים **mal'āk 'ēlōhîm** and the plural is much more important. The multiple angels of God Jacob saw in his dream and those we read about here in Genesis 32:1 and elsewhere in God's Word are indeed eternal celestial beings, but they are created beings whom God (אֱלֹהִים **'ēlōhîm**) created along with mankind and the rest of the living creatures. The world's creatures (including the *'angels of God'*) are distinct from God Himself who is also sometimes referred to as מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים **'ēlōhîm** in scripture (e.g. when He appeared to Gideon in Judges 6:20 and to Hagar in Genesis 21:17).

Look at the map - Jacob Reconciles with Esau



Jacob Reconciles with Esau

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Genesis 32-33 – Jacob and Esau Reunite

Recall from Genesis 31 that immediately prior to Jacob's arrival at **מַחֲנַיִם** **maḥānayim**— **two camps** Jacob and his uncle Laban had just concluded a mutual non-aggression agreement somewhere in the hill country of Gilead. The exact location called Galeed and Mizpah where they made that covenant is unknown. Regardless of that though, Jacob needed to make his way out of the hill country down to the River Jordan to enter Canaan. To reach the Jordan, the family followed the River Jabbok. The locations mentioned in Genesis 32 lay somewhere along the River Jabbok, but the exact locations of Mahanaim and Peniel (where Jacob later wrestled with God) remain a mystery as does the exact location where Jacob reunited with his twin brother Esau.

³And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, ⁴instructing them, “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now. ⁵I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’”

⁶And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him.” ⁷Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, ⁸thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.” Genesis 32:3-8 (ESV)

Small wonder Jacob was afraid when he heard that Esau was coming with four hundred men. After all Esau had vowed to kill Jacob as soon as their father Isaac died because Jacob and their mother Rebekah had deceived Isaac into giving Jacob his blessing of the firstborn that rightfully belonged to Esau. Recall that the firstborn son traditionally received a double portion of the inheritance from his father.

Like most of us, Jacob's initial response to the bad news was to formulate a plan to deal with it on his own. However, he soon realized that his plan would not protect his family unless God intervened.

⁹And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ ¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. ¹¹Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. ¹²But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’” Genesis 32:9-12 (ESV)

Having recognized his need for God's provision and protection, Jacob turned at last to prayer. Here in Jacob's prayer, I believe we see true contrition and humility – characteristics that were not usually part of Jacob's (human) nature. In this, I recognize something of myself. How often have I finally turned to God in abject desperation after my earthly plans and my own strengths failed to save the day? But prayer should be our first inclination, not our last resort.

Jacob's prayer is honest and open. He reminds God of the promise given in his dream of the ladder ascending into Heaven – the same promise God had given to Jacob's father Isaac and grandfather Abraham before him to make a great and innumerable nation (Israel) from Jacob's offspring. But one

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aspect of Jacob's prayer is crucial for us to note. When Jacob reminded God of His promises (as if God needed reminding), he did so not as a hopeless plea but in honest trust that God always fulfills His promises and never fails in His purposes to do good to those who love Him. Jesus also reminded us of this critical aspect of our prayers.

22b "Have faith in God. 23 Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. Mark 11:22b-24 (ESV)

WARNING – This verse is a favorite of the blasphemous and heretical so-called "Prosperity Gospel" also known as "Word of Faith." The charlatans who peddle this false teaching promise that whatever anyone desires, God will grant them if only they have enough faith. If God's will is not to grant the prayerful request (or at least not grant it right away or in some other manner than the supplicant desires) the prosperity gospel preachers will answer that the person just didn't pray with sufficient faith. This often has the tragic consequence that the victims of this lie lose faith in God altogether.

Of course, this raises some tough questions that we won't delve into here. But be forewarned that this false and unbiblical lie from our enemy is out there and powerful to deceive even the elect.

ASIDE – Remember from our study of Genesis 31:14-16 that Leah and Rachel had complained that their father Laban had taken their wealth for himself. When we looked at that passage, we examined the tradition of the bride price or dowry. We noted that Abraham's servant had given bountiful gifts to Rebekah's family in exchange for his being allowed to take her back to Canaan as a wife for Jacob's father Isaac. However, there is no mention of Jacob giving such gifts to his uncle Laban as a bride price for his daughters Leah and Rachel. Here in Jacob's prayer, we see confirmation that Jacob had left Canaan with only his staff and the clothing on his back. Thus, he had nothing to give to Laban as a bride price for Rachel.

Therefore, we find that Laban was justified in requiring Jacob to serve seven years for her. Of course, Laban then acted unrighteously when he pulled the old switcheroo on Jacob – giving him Leah instead of Rachel and then making Jacob work another seven years for the girl he *really* wanted. Furthermore, Laban should have put the monetary value of Jacob's fourteen years of labor aside in trust for his daughters in case Jacob died or some other event forced them to return home to their father's house. As we know, Laban did not set anything aside in trust for his daughters. Laban himself admitted that he knew he had benefited personally from Jacob's labors – Genesis 30:27.

13 So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, 14 two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15 thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. 16 These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove." 17 He instructed the first, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' 18 then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.'" 19 He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him, 20 and you shall say, 'Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For

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he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me. Genesis 32:13-20

(ESV)

In ancient herding societies and in herding societies even today, wealth is measured by the number of animals a person owns. We can see from the extent of the gifts Jacob offered to Esau, that he was quite wealthy indeed by that standard. Of course, we have no way to determine how much Jacob had left for himself and his family after sending off these gifts, but even if he retained only a small proportion of what he had brought from Haran, Jacob’s flocks and herds must have been enormous.

²¹So the present [the gift for Esau] passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp.

²²The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children [יָלֵד yeled], and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. Genesis 32:21-23 (ESV)

Take another look at the map – Jacob reconciles with Esau.

We know from this story that Jacob and his family descended from the hill country of Gilead down into the Jordan River valley by way of the River Jabbok. The Jabbok descends over 1000 feet from its source springs near Amman – the capital city of modern Jordan, to its mouth at the River Jordan. The gorge through which the Jabbok passes is deep, but wide. As shown on the map, Jacob probably crossed over the Jabbok on the Kings Highway that he had followed southward from Damascus, then turned westward along the southernmost bank of the Jabbok until he reached Mahanaim (where the angels of God met him), and he established his camp there.

The exact location of Mahanaim is unknown, however it must have been near one of the fords of the Jabbok because Jacob sent his entire entourage across the Jabbok from there as we read in Genesis 32:22-23.

Before we move on, notice that Genesis 32:22 in the ESV mentions that Jacob had eleven children. The Hebrew word יָלֵד **yeled** may also denote sons specifically rather than both sons and daughters. We know that Jacob had at least twelve children who had journeyed from Paddan-aram including eleven sons and one daughter. English language translations are roughly split on rendering יָלֵד **yeled** as either ‘sons’ or ‘children.’ In this case, I think the ESV (and some other English language translations) get it wrong.

Jacob Wrestles With ‘A Man’

We now come to one of the most famous stories in God’s Word. We’ll read through the whole story first and then examine it in detail.

²⁴And Jacob was left alone. And a man [אִישׁ 'ish] wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” ²⁷And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob [יָעֹב ya‘āqōb - heel holder or supplanter], but Israel [יִשְׂרָאֵל yisrā’el - God prevails], for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he

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said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel [פְּנִי'ֵל p'nî'el - facing God or face of God], saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh. Genesis 32:24-32 (ESV)

The word אִישׁ 'îš which we see in Genesis 32:24 translated as ‘man’ occurs over 2,000 times in the Old Testament. The first occurrence of אִישׁ 'îš is in Genesis 2:23.

²³Then the man [אָדָם 'ādām] said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man [אִישׁ 'îš].” Genesis 2:23 (ESV)

Note that two separate words are translated as ‘man’ in this verse. The Hebrew words אָדָם 'ādām and אִישׁ 'îš both mean man, mankind or human being, but אָדָם 'ādām has the additional connotation of being the proper name for the very first man. For its part, אִישׁ 'îš also connotes a male human being as distinct from a female, and ironically a created human being as distinct from God the uncreated One. Notice in Genesis 2:23 that some English translations capitalize the second occurrence of ‘*Man*’ to emphasize that אִישׁ 'îš in this case is referring to mankind, not just an individual human being.

But אִישׁ 'îš doesn’t always refer to a human being. Here in Genesis 32:24, אִישׁ 'îš refers to God Himself in the form of a man. The context of the passage makes this very clear. We also find אִישׁ 'îš used to refer to angels as when the angel Gabriel’s appeared and spoke to the prophet Daniel.

^{21b}...the man [אִישׁ 'îš] Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. Daniel 9:21b (ESV)

Clearly the “man” who wrestled with Jacob was a human manifestation of Almighty God. So how is it that He was unable to defeat an ordinary human being in a wrestling match? The only similar personage with whom we can compare this “man” is Jesus of Nazareth – God the Son who took on human form to become the perfectly sinless sacrifice required for the remission of all mankind’s sin. There are scripture passages which make it clear that Jesus relinquished a portion of his godly power and character when He took on human flesh. For example, Jesus in human form was not altogether omniscient (all knowing). He told His disciples this Himself.

³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁶“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. Matthew 24:35-36 (ESV)

Might God have chosen purposely to give up part of His omnipotence for the time He wrestled with Jacob to give Jacob a “fighting chance?” We can only speculate. Clearly though, this ‘man’ who wrestled with Jacob retained at least *some* of God’s infinite power, because all He had to do was simply touch Jacob’s hip socket to dislocate it. This feat was certainly beyond the physical strength of any ordinary man.

Jacob was also fully committed to this engagement, refusing the release the ‘man’ with whom he struggled before receiving a blessing from him. Jacob’s unrelenting desire for this blessing is reminiscent of his having gone to such lengths as deceit and lying to receive the blessing he wanted from his earthly father Isaac. Jacob persisted in seeking the blessing even after the ‘man’ dislocated his hip.

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But why would God choose to engage with Jacob in this way at all? What lesson was God teaching Jacob (and us)? Again, we can only speculate. We know from the remainder of the story that God used the occasion to give Jacob a new name. Throughout God's Word whenever we find someone given a new name, it is always God Himself that does the renaming. Jacob certainly recognized that and named the site where he encountered this 'man' פְּנִיֵּאל **p'nû'el** to commemorate his coming face-to-face with God Almighty (albeit God in human form).

I often ponder our relationship with God our Father and how He must view His children. When we are adamantly rebellious, He might see us as an earthly father would view a stubborn two-year-old. If we engage in combative play with Him like Jacob, I think He must find that cute and humorous since His strength is infinitely greater than ours. Of course, God could have broken away from this mock wrestling at any time, yet He allowed Jacob to continue the struggle all night long, knowing what Jacob didn't – that this encounter would culminate with God giving Jacob not only the blessing he sought, but also a new name reflecting God's nature in place of the scheming and deceitful nature reflected in Jacob's birth name. Oddly with occasional exceptions, the Biblical text in both the Old and New Testaments continues to refer to Jacob by his birth name, using the name Israel to refer to the nation that arose from Israel's descendants while continuing to refer to the man himself as Jacob.

Nevertheless, God did dislocate Jacob's hip as a disciplinary reminder to Jacob of God's infinitely greater power. This reminds me of the story that Paul told in his second letter to the church at Corinth.

***⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.
⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.
⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9***
(ESV)

We can well imagine that Jacob walked for the remainder of his life with a slight limp as a reminder of God's power and his need for God's continual provision and protection.

Before we press on, let's briefly consider the name Israel assigned to the place where he wrestled with God. The name פְּנִיֵּאל **p'nû'el** means 'facing God' or 'face of God.' The relevance of this name is obvious. But in the English translations there is a little confusion. In the ESV, we see two different English transliterations for the same Hebrew name. Most English translations do the same – spelling the name Peniel in Genesis 32:30 and Penuel in Genesis 32:31.

I'm frankly at a loss to explain this. One of the resources that I use heavily in my studies of God's Word is [Blue Letter Bible](#). It provides a comprehensive collection of study aids including a lexicon with audible pronunciations of most words. The [lexicon entry](#) for פְּנִיֵּאל **p'nû'el** includes two different pronunciations as reflected in the ESV text. However, the underlying Hebrew text in both these verses is identical. So where did the variant pronunciations come from?

Recall that the oldest Hebrew texts include only the consonants. The vowel pointing system found in modern Hebrew texts wasn't invented until the Middle Ages. The vowel sounds associated with the older texts were passed along through the years as oral traditions. Apparently two separate oral traditions for פְּנִיֵּאל **p'nû'el** have evolved over the millennia since Moses first committed this story to writing, and those are preserved in the two variant spellings we find in our English Bibles.

Esau Meets Jacob

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Take another look at the map – Jacob Reconciles with Esau.

In Genesis 33, we find Jacob finally reuniting with his twin brother Esau after over twenty years apart. The narrative of their meeting is found immediately following the story of Jacob wrestling with God. The exact location where the two brothers met is unknown. We do know (assuming the Genesis narrative is chronological here) that the brothers met just after Jacob's encounter with God and before his arrival in Succoth which lay along the north bank of the River Jabbok just a few miles upstream from the Jordan, so the place of their meeting was most likely somewhere upstream from Succoth and downstream from Mahanaim.

Esau's route up from Seir in the Negev most likely followed the west bank of the Dead Sea and then up the west bank of the Jordan to just north of the mouth of the Jabbok where Esau forded the Jordan before going up the north bank of the Jabbok to meet Jacob.

¹And Jacob lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two female servants. ²And he put the servants with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. ³He himself went on before them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. Genesis 33:1-3 (ESV)

Jacob was obviously still fearful of Esau despite the large gifts of appeasement he had sent on ahead to Esau. Perhaps Jacob's trust in God's good intentions wasn't quite so solid as we might have assumed from Jacob's prayer at Mahanaim. Notice also the favoritism Jacob exhibited in how he ordered his family as they approached Esau's party – Bilhah, Zilpah, and their children, then Leah and her children, and finally Rachel with her single son Joseph. Without doubt, Jacob's reasoning was to divide the procession in a way that would minimize the possibility that his favorites Rachel and Joseph would be harmed in case Esau and his men attacked.

⁴But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵And when Esau lifted up his eyes and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." ⁶Then the servants drew near, they and their children, and bowed down. ⁷Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down. And last Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Genesis 33:4-7 (ESV)

We can well imagine the intensity of emotion when the two brothers finally met and reconciled. Jacob in particular must have felt a tremendous relief that his fear of his brother had been dispelled. Esau was relieved of the heavy burden of bitterness and unforgiveness he had carried in his heart toward his brother for over twenty years. God's Word makes it clear that carrying grudges against our fellow creatures is terribly harmful to both the unforgiven and the one who doesn't forgive.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that such animosity also separates us from God.

²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:22-24 (ESV)

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Notice Jacob's response when Esau asked about the women and children – saying that it was God who had graciously given. Despite his many faults, Jacob at least humbly acknowledged God's provision in his life.

***3Behold, children [רָגְלִים yeled] are a heritage from the LORD,
the fruit of the womb a reward.
4Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.
5Blessed is the man
who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. Psalm 127:3-5 (ESV)***

8Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor in the sight of my lord." 9But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." 10Jacob said, "No, please, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand. For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me. 11Please accept my blessing that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough." Thus he urged him, and he took it. Genesis 33:8-11 (ESV)

I always find it humorous when Bible passages describe the characters' negotiations over material property. Surely Esau must have needed and wanted the livestock that Jacob had sent ahead to him as a gift of appeasement. Nevertheless, protocol required Esau to at least make a pretense of refusing the gift. We found this same sort of humorous, formally deferential back-and-forth when Abraham was negotiating with Ephron the Hittite to buy the cave of Machpelah as a burial place for his wife Sarah (Genesis 23). For his part, although Jacob had been quite prosperous in Paddan-aram, the gift he offered to his brother must have caused at least somewhat of a financial burden on his family. Without doubt, Esau had no real intention of refusing the gift any more than Jacob had of hiding his reasons for sending it or taking it back despite the material setback the gift brought on his family.

Humorous as I find this exchange of pleasantries, Jacob's statement that seeing Esau was "***...like seeing the face of God***" still shocks and confounds me. Pretty as Esau may have been, his face most certainly was *not* glorious as the face of God! What exactly did Jacob mean by saying this? I think what we're up against here is an example of the inadequacy of human language to communicate ideas precisely. I don't believe Jacob intended to compare Esau's appearance to God's, but rather to tell his brother how being accepted by him after many years of rightfully deserved rejection and animosity made Jacob feel. Remember that Jacob had indeed just encountered God face-to-face. I think he was trying to say that the overwhelming emotions he felt at being accepted by Esau were similar to the exhilaration he had felt when he encountered God Himself at Peniel.

12Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go ahead of you." 13But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail, and that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. 14Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are ahead of me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

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15So Esau said, “Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me.” But he said, “What need is there? Let me find favor in the sight of my lord.” Genesis 33:12-15 (ESV)

Certainly, both brothers were relieved and glad to have made their peace together. However, it seems neither of them really wanted to “hang out” together – at least not just then. From a practical perspective, separating would have reduced the pressure of their combined herds and flocks on the available water and pasture resources of the lower Jordan valley. Furthermore, Jacob intended as we shall see to return first to Bethel (where God had spoken to him in his dream of the stairway to Heaven) before returning to his family in Beersheba.

Jacob Arrives in Canaan

16So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. 17But Jacob journeyed to Succoth [סֻכּוֹת sukôt - booths], and built himself a house and made booths for his livestock. Therefore the name of the place is called Succoth. Genesis 33: 16-17 (ESV)

It's unclear (to me at least) why Jacob tarried in Succoth east of the Jordan rather than fulfilling the command he had received from God to return to the land of Canaan on the opposite side of the river. It is also unclear how long Jacob remained at Succoth. Certainly, it wasn't just an overnigher because Jacob built himself a house there. Perhaps Jacob stayed at Succoth because the early Spring snow melt flooding of the Jordan would have made it unfordable along its whole length. But if that were the case, Esau would also have been unable to cross over.

Look again at the map – Jacob Reconciles with Esau. If neither of the brothers were able to cross the Jordan due to flooding, the proposed route from Seir taken by Esau to meet with Jacob on this map must be incorrect. However, Esau may have taken the more easterly route along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea and then up the eastern bank of the Jordan instead. That route would have then required him to cross the Jabbok before meeting Jacob.

18And Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram, and he camped before the city. 19And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for a hundred pieces of money the piece of land on which he had pitched his tent. 20There he erected an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel [אל אלהי ישראל El-Elohe-Israel – God the God (or ruler) of Israel]. Genesis 33:18-20 (ESV)

The name Jacob gave to the altar he built at Shechem is worthy of a brief closer look. Recall that Jacob had just been renamed **יִשְׂרָאֵל yisrā'el** when God wrestled with him at Penuel. Jacob's naming of this altar was a form of devotion and gratitude to the God who:

- promised in Jacob's dream at Bethel to make a great nation of Israel's offspring and to bless all the families of the earth through them
- led him and preserved him through his twenty-year sojourn in Paddan-aram
- gave him wives, children, and prosperity there
- commanded him to return to his family in Canaan
- accompanied and protected him and his family on the return journey
- wrestled with him at Penuel and renamed him **יִשְׂרָאֵל yisrā'el**
- restored his relationship with his twin brother Esau

Genesis 32-33 – Jacob and Esau Reunite

- brought him safely at last back to the land of Canaan which He had promised to give to Israel's offspring as an everlasting inheritance.
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Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll delve into the sordid and scandalous encounter between Jacob's family and the men of Shechem in Genesis 34.