

Wrestling with God; Jacob as a paradigm for the nation of Israel

By Paul Wyns

Introduction

The names of the eponymous fathers are always associated with the covenant name of God. *Yahweh* is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Of the three patriarchs, Abraham and his wife responded in faith to God's call, Isaac and his wife were the first couple born into the covenant and Jacob with his wives became the progenitors of the twelve tribes. It is from the renaming of Jacob that the nation derives its name – **ISRAEL**. The life and character of Jacob finds resonance with the nation's later history; the story of Jacob is therefore paradigmatic for Israel's relationship with God.

The grabber of the heel

From his birth Jacob is locked in a struggle for supremacy with his brother Esau, whose heel he grabs. Alter observes, "In this instance, the etymology is transparent: *Ya'aqob*, "Jacob," and *'aqeb*, "heel." The grabbing of the heel by the younger twin becomes a kind of emblem of their future relationship, and the birth, like the oracle, again invokes the struggle against primogeniture"¹

Jacob tempts Esau into trading his birthright (*bekorah*, 25:29ff.) and then deceives his father, Isaac, into granting the blessing (*berekah*) to him instead of Esau. Of, course this does not exculpate Isaac, who ought to have known better but was blinded by love for

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis, Translation and commentary* (W.W. Norton & Company New York London, 1996), p.128

his firstborn - - Esau, the twin covered in red hair – the man after the flesh.² In contrast Jacob was a “plain” or “simple” man; this does not mean that he was domesticated or ordinary, for Jacob certainly had his share of charisma, but rather the Hebrew *tam* suggests integrity or even innocence.³ Both the OT and the NT make it clear that Yahweh “loved” Jacob and “hated” Esau from the very beginning, even before birth. Yet both men displayed times in their lives when they neither deserved either Yahweh’s love or His hatred – “*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.*”⁴

² Isaac, “*trembled with a great trembling greatly*” (lit. Hebrew of Gen.27:33) when he realised that he had blessed Jacob instead of Esau. The “trembling” was not caused by anger but by fear – he knew that he was frustrating God’s purpose. Esau is the “red” man so named because of his thick “goat-like” covering of reddish hair. Edom is from the same root as Adam and he typifies the fleshly man who pleases himself. The story plays on Esau’s coarsely appetitive character - - he trades his birth right for “red-pottage”(lentils) or in the Hebrew “this red stuff” (*‘adom* - *‘adom*). Thus he counted the promises of God as nothing and preferred to remain in Adam. The goat-like characteristics of Esau may reflect the scapegoat sent away bearing its sin (like Cain).

³ “In biblical idiom, the heart can be crooked (*‘aqob*, the same root as Jacob’s name – cf. Jeremiah 17:9), and the idiomatic antonym is pureness or innocence – *tom* – “of heart” (as in Genesis 20:5). There may well be a complicating irony in the use of this epithet for Jacob, since his behaviour is very far from simple or innocent in the scene that is about to unfold.” [*Ibid*, Alter, *Genesis*, p.128]

⁴ Paul bases his argument on “election” in Romans 9 on Malachi’s prophecy in Mal. 1: 2-3. The quotation from Malachi (“*Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated*”) was spoken many years after the lifetimes of both sons, and can only refer to the *races* descended from the two brothers. It does not refer to God’s attitude to the brothers *as individuals before birth*. The race descended from Jacob (called “Jacob” in Malachi) was chosen as God’s people; the race descended from Esau was rejected, and remained outside His purpose. The statement is only true in a racial sense as there would be individuals from both races who would either be accepted or rejected. [See: Geoff and Ray Walker, *Romans, in the light of John’s Gospel*, (Bible Student Press, ISBN 0 9524979 0 5, 1995)] The Jewish argument that Paul was countering seems to be that they were an elect race because of descent from

The “love-hate”⁵ relationship between the two brothers is also reflected in the lives of the two sisters, Rachel and Leah, who become the progenitors of the twelve tribes. It is

Abraham – yes, this might be true says Paul, but God is able to cast of even the children of Abraham; this happened with Ishmael. But, the Jewish objector counters: “Ishmael was the son of a slave, not the son of Sarah, for, *“In Isaac shall thy seed be called”*, therefore, of course God chose Isaac. True, says Paul, but what then of Jacob and Esau? These were born together, both in the bonds of God’s covenant, yet even before their birth the election of one and the blessing of the other race was declared. Gods will concerning the nations cannot be resisted. He can elevate a nation to high estate and cast them down again. He can – and does – deal with them as a potter uses clay, to form and destroy to make and remake as he pleases. The apostle was countering the nationalistic exclusivist view that because certain individuals belonged (or were excluded from) certain nations, this conferred inalienable rights to everyone in that nation. Not so, for God does not just judge races and nations, but also individuals. There is much in Jacob’s character that is questionable – but his life is moulded by God; there is also much in Esau’s character that is deplorable – but his generosity of spirit and forgiveness towards his brother in later life also speak volumes about his changed character and put Jacob to shame: Lawrence Semel comments; “Jacob's reprehensible character is not like Esau's. He sees the significance and value of the birthright. Jacob's blameworthy character is seen in his desire to have the blessing by grasping after it. Esau relativizes everything in the interest of having this world and its pleasures. Jacob relativizes everything in order to obtain that which was promised. What he valued and wanted was worthy. His mode of conduct and behavior to get it was more reprehensible than Esau his brother.” [Election and Transformation Genesis](#)

⁵ Just as the Lord had *“loved Jacob and hated Esau”*, so Jacob *“loved Rachel”* (29:18) and *“hated Leah”*, a fact noticed by *Yahweh* (*“The Lord saw that Leah was hated”* – Gen.29:31, 33), who then proceeded to bless Leah with children while the “loved” wife remained barren. Just as there was much in the character of Jacob that could not be “loved”, so also in the character of Rachel who seems to have been rather scheming like her husband. The terms – love and hate seem rather harsh in English, as they denote two extremes of emotion. Of course, Jacob loved Leah and loved the children that she bare to him, the

surely ironic that Laban justifies his wedding night deception with the words; *“It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the first born”* (Gen.29:26). The competitiveness of the matriarch’s for Jacob’s love and for his children, results in disharmony that cascades down the centuries and reflects the tribal fractiousness that follows. Particularly enlightening are Rachel’s words at the birth of “her” son by proxy - Naphtali; *“With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed”* (Gen.30:8). This anticipates Jacob’s own wrestling match in Genesis 32. Jacob’s actions had far reaching consequences for his whole family; resulting in his own deception⁶ and the sale of his favourite son Joseph (the firstborn of Rachel) into Egypt. Rachel’s own struggle with her sister ended in death – the birth pangs of Messiah; Ben-oni, the *‘son-of-sorrow’* who became Benjamin the *‘son-of-the-right-hand’*. Jacob’s whole life is one of struggle and hardship; this is even reflected in his first encounter with Rachel, which reverses the

problem was that he loved Rachel more because of her great beauty. The preference of one wife and her children above another is partly complicit in the hatred displayed towards Joseph by his brethren (Gen.37:5, 8).

⁶ Alter observes that just as Jacob had tricked his father Isaac with a garment of goat’s hair, so Jacob himself had been tricked by his sons with Joseph’s garment soaked in goats blood – later Joseph himself is imprisoned when he is falsely accused of adultery by the wife of Potiphar, who offers the garment she snatched from Joseph as evidence. Alter says, “There is in the biblical view a causal chain that firmly connects one event to the next, link by link, and that, too, accounts for a good deal of recurrence in the narrative shaping of events; for analogy reinforces this sense of causal connection. One could say that everything that befalls Jacob flows from the fatal moment when he buys the birthright from Esau for a serving of lentil pottage. That event, of course, was itself prefigured in the intrauterine struggle between the twins, and it is followed, both causally and analogically, by the theft of the blessing, Jacob’s flight, his various confrontations with the two rival sisters who are his wives, his contentions with his wily father-in-law, his wrestling with the angel, and even his troubles with his sons, who deceive him with a garment, Joseph’s tunic, just as he, masquerading as Esau, deceived his own father with a garment.”

usual norms surrounding the betrothal convention (the woman drawing water for the man):

“In this case, not only does the bridegroom take care of the drawing of the water, but he has an obstacle to overcome – the stone on the mouth of the well. This minor variation of the [betrothal] convention contributes to the consistent characterisation of Jacob, for we already know him, as his name at birth (Ya’aqov) has been etymologized, as the “heel-grabber” or wrestler, and we shall continue to see him as the contender, the man who seizes his fate, tackles his adversaries, with his own two hands. If the well of the betrothal scene is in general associated with woman and fertility, it is particularly appropriate that this one should be blocked by an obstacle, for Jacob will obtain the woman he wants only through great labour, against resistance, and even then God will, in the relevant biblical idiom, “shut up her womb” for years until she finally bears Joseph. There is even some point in the fact that the obstacle is a stone, for, as J.P. Fokkelman has noted, stones are a motif that accompanies Jacob in his arduous career: he puts a stone under his head as a pillow at Beth-El; after the epiphany there he sets up a commemorative marker of stones; and when he returns from Mesopotamia, he concludes a mutual nonaggression pact with his father-in-law by setting up on the border between them a testimonial heap of stones. These are not really symbols, but there is something incipiently metaphorical about them: Jacob is a man who sleeps on stones, speaks in stones, wrestles with stones, contending with the hard unyielding nature of things, whereas, in pointed contrast, his favoured son will make his way in the world as a dealer in the truths intimated through the filmy insubstantiality of dreams.”⁷

However, Jacob also had a dream vision, the vision he received at Beth-el being as substantive as any that Joseph received.

The stairway to heaven

When fleeing from his brother, Jacob arrived at Luz, where he was to overnight. It should be remembered that Jacob was about to leave the land and that the haste of his

⁷ *Ibid*, Alter, {ABN}, p.55

flight meant that he had left everything behind. He was afraid and destitute and about to become a refugee. It was here that he used an (altar?) stone for a make shift pillow, probably laying his coat on it. During the night he had an awesome dream – the dream/vision was so real that he erected the massive stone on which he rested and anointed it, calling it the “*house of God*” or Beth-el in the Hebrew. After this act of worship Jacob makes a vow, a vow in which he seems to dictate the terms. The oath that he swore must be divided between a protasis and an apodosis--"if... then... *“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God”* (Gen.28:20-21). In the first instance this may seem presumptuous, but Jacob is only paraphrasing what God had promised in the vision; in fact God did accomplish all these things for Jacob, but Jacob had to learn to depend on God instead of his own strength.

It is extremely significant, and to my knowledge unrecognized by other scholars, **that Beth-el is a reversal of Babel.**

Babel (Gen.11)	Beth-el (Gen.28)
Let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name (v.4)	A ladder and the top of it reached to heaven (v.12)
The Lord came down (v.5)	Angels ascending and descending on it (v.12)
The Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth (v.8)	Thou shalt spread abroad to the east, and to the north, and to the south (v.14)
Babel (confusion??)	This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven (v.17) Bethel (v.19)

The theophany at Babel shows striking similarities (and contrasts) with the first Beth-el account, even the name Babel,⁸ which carries the folk – etymology of confusion but probably comes from the Sumerian *babilla*, “gate [residence] of the gods” (NIDOTTE) is

⁸ Allen P. Ross comments: “However, the key play in the passage is not strictly paronomasia since there is no connection etymologically between בָּבֶל and בֵּתֵל. It is a phonetic wordplay. The people would say that the name was called "בֵּתֵל" because Yahweh "made a babble" (בָּבַל) of the language”.

similar to the explanation given by Jacob in 28:17. Jacob obviously saw a Babylonian ziggurat⁹ reaching up to heaven, similar to the one described earlier in Genesis 11. The reason behind building the Babel tower was hubris “to make a name” and this *anticipates* the renaming of Jacob in the *other Beth-el account* (35:10). It is clear that we are meant to draw the theological conclusion (which does not dawn on Jacob until chapter 35) that he could not achieve the blessing by his own strength, or by deception; *Yahweh* had promised to make Abraham’s “name great” (12:2 again contrasting 11:4) but could only do so to Jacob after he had undergone a change of character. In one fell swoop the narrative unites Genesis 11 (and 12) with *both* Beth-el accounts.

Scholars have accepted that the period of cursing ends with the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 and the blessings begin with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12.¹⁰ It is fitting therefore that Jacob has a dream that reverses Babel, that the vision promises to bless him and make his name great, like that of Abraham. However, the dream has an implicit warning for Jacob - - self-sufficiency will not work. This is a lesson that the nation and its progenitor have been slow to learn. Ross reaches a similar conclusion in his article on Babel (although he fails to note the parallels with Beth-el): “For the Israelite nation the

⁹ Allen P. Ross observes that although the actual word for ziggurat is not employed it represents the same idea: “The connection to Akkadian *similtu* with the Mesopotamian background is the most probable view. In the myth of “Nergel and Ereshkigal” communication between the netherworld and heaven takes place via the long stairway of heaven that leads to the gate of Anu, Enlil, and Ea. The idea of a ziggurat with its long staircase to the temple top would be behind the idea. Nothing in Genesis 28, however, describes a ziggurat. The most that can be said is that a word used in ziggurat settings is cognate to the word used here, a word that fits the way of communication between heaven and earth. So Hebrew מִלְּבָנִים is appropriate to the point of the story--here was a place that heaven and earth touch, where there is access to God.” Allen P. Ross, *Studies in the Life of Jacob Part 1: Jacob's Vision: The Founding of Bethel* (Bibliotheca Sacra 142 (1985) 224-37)

¹⁰ So Ross, *Ibid*, part 4; “The primeval age ends with judgmental scattering and complete confusion. The blessing is not here; the world must await the new history. In view of this, the story of the scattering of the nations is actually the turning point of the book from primeval history to the history of the blessing.”

lesson was clear: If she was to survive as a nation, she must obey God's will, for the nation that bristles with pride and refuses to obey will be scattered.”¹¹ Also, “Unfortunately, Israel also raised her head in pride and refused to obey the Lord God. Thus she too was scattered across the face of the earth.”

Over the next 20 years God will protect Jacob and enable him to return to the land with a large family and the many possessions that he had gained through his struggles - - however, first he must encounter his nemesis and confront the reason for his hasty departure.

Jacob's wrestling and Israel's victory

Genesis 32 records the wrestling match and the renaming of Jacob on the borders of the land by the Jabbok River ford.¹² He is about to enter the land after his long exile and will soon have to confront his brother Esau. The story of Jacob's encounter with the numinous is full of ambiguities, perhaps deliberately – what are the two camps? That of Jacob and Esau or that of Jacob and the angels? Why does his opponent beg for release

¹¹ *Ibid*, Ross, part 4 – See footnote there; “The concept of dispersion or scattering of peoples was an ancient one. Kitchen deals with the idea of exile and scattering in the ancient literature to show that the concept was real (fearfully real) for Israel (Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Ancient Orient, 'Deuteronomism,' and the Old Testament," in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1970), pp. 1-24).”

¹² Steve McKenzie comments; “The names *ya'aqob* and *yabboq* form a lovely word play with the verb *ye'aqeb*, "he wrestles," in verse 25. In fact, the two uses of the verb *'abaq* with *'immo*, "with him," form a framework around the narration of the wrestling match itself in verses 25f. The noun *panim*, "face," occurs five times in verses 21 f., and twice in 33:10, aside from its use in the Peniel/Peniel (vss. 31f.). Finally, the root *nsl* "to deliver," found in verse 31 is the same verb used in Jacob's prayer in verse 12. It is obvious that Genesis 32:23-33 represents a sophisticated literary piece with intricate connections with the passages which surround it.” Steve McKenzie *"You Have Prevailed", The Function of Jacob's encounter at Peniel in the Jacob Cycle* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Restoration Quarterly 23, 1980) 225-31.

before the dawn? Who emerges as the victor? What does the name of Israel actually mean?

Firstly, Wessner observes that Jacob is alone when he meets his opponent.¹³ The solitary nature of the encounter is emphasised – Jacob is as it were “stripped bare” of all he owns and all his pretensions; this is a life and death struggle. He meets his opponent in the dark and can only guess at his identity - - is it perhaps his brother Esau? The encounter with Esau in the next chapter plays on this solitary struggle “face-to-face” (cf. *Peniel* in 32:30) and Jack Miles suggests that the opponent was indeed Esau. His arguments are interesting, particularly because Esau personifies and embodies Jacob’s life-struggles. It is certainly possible that Esau blessed Jacob and renamed him Israel; and that behind his wrestling and the face of Esau, Jacob perceived the face of God and his own resistance to divine discipline.¹⁴ As Miles remarks, “This is a story, from beginning to end, of

¹³ Wessner states: “Jacob's complete solitude quite effectively not only by stating that "he sent across [the Jabbok] all that he had" and he "was left alone," but also by the complete absence of any terms of possession or family in verses 23-33. Therefore, the divinely initiated פְּנִים אֶל־פְּנִים [*face to face*] interaction, including the supernaturally induced limp (and possibly the prohibition), served as a God-sent physical "sign" to verify and legitimize the primary (and private) event of the pericope, that is, the change of Jacob's name to Israel.”

	יַעֲקֹב	אֱלֹהִים	עֵשָׂו	family	possessions
32:1-22	9	3	9	3	24
32:23-33	7	2	0	0	0
33:1-17	3	3	6	15	5

This table is a summary of the full analysis given in Wessner, *Face to Face: Panim 'el-Panim in Old Testament Literature* (Theological Research Exchange Network, #048-0211, 1998), 109. See: Mark D. Wessner, *Toward a Literary Understanding of "Face to Face" In Genesis 32:23-32* (Restoration Quarterly 42.3 (2000) 169-77, Prince George, B.C)

¹⁴ In ways that the reader of Genesis knows and Esau can only guess at, Jacob has indeed striven with God, and irony has ever been one of his weapons. Hours later, when Jacob finally meets Esau face-to-face, Jacob greets his brother with the altogether exceptional statement: "To see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis 33:10). The wordplay in these two verses--on "the face of God" (*'el*), "the face of God" (*'elohim*), and "God (*'elohim*) face-to-face"--is extremely suggestive, especially if we recall that these lines, spoken half-tauntingly to Esau, are also spoken in the hearing of God.

disguises, masquerades, trickery and double meaning. Jacob and Esau were quite literally born wrestling (Genesis 25:26).” There is certainly some truth to the suggestion that it could be Esau, however, the touching of Jacob’s thigh causing the dislocation of his hip point to a supernatural encounter.

Why did Jacob’s opponent wish to leave before the dawn? This has had various unconvincing explanations by scholars.¹⁵ The simplest explanation is also the most satisfying – his opponent wanted to keep his identity secret. It seems that his supernatural opponent deliberately wished to leave Jacob in a state of uncertainty – had he been wrestling a stranger...or Esau....or ...? This explains why no extraordinary power was used until Jacob had wrestled his opponent to a draw – a remarkable feat. The

Jack Miles, *Jacob's Wrestling Match*, Was It an Angel or Esau? Jack Miles is the author of *God: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

[cited online Jan 2008] <http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/Peniel.htm>

¹⁵ Fraser, Bennett, Gunkel, and Kittel thought that the original sources included a river god or demon whose enemy was the sun god which diminished the river with its rays (especially in summer). In other words the Hebrew tradition was "pure fiction" (Schmidt) based on an old myth about a river god named Jabbok who attempted to hinder anyone from crossing. Peniel was the “gods” shrine. Alter remarks, “The folkloric character of this haunting episode becomes especially clear at this point. The notion of a night spirit that loses its power or is not permitted to go about in daylight is common to many folk traditions, as is the troll or guardian figure who blocks access to a ford or bridge....It has led Claus Westermann that the nameless wrestler must be some sort of demon.” Alter himself, however, stresses that the reason for the reluctance to face the dawn was that the opponent *resisted identification*. Alter comments; “Appearing to Jacob in the dark of the night, before the morning when Esau will be reconciled with Jacob, he is the embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob’s dark night of the soul. He is in some sense a doubling of Esau as adversary, but he is also a doubling of all with whom Jacob has had to contend, and he may equally well be an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle within himself.” [*Ibid*, Genesis, p.181] The search for extraneous underlying sources in other traditions or parallels with foreign (often later) folklore does the integrity of the text a disservice and is the sort of speculation that belongs to a by gone era of biblical scholarship.

narrator has purposely left the reader in suspense until this point in the story - - for like Jacob we are unsure who is represented by the “two camps” (*Mahanaim*) or who the opponent is. Jacob - - the deceiver is cheated of his victory by a supernatural touch. Suddenly, the identity of the opponent becomes clear to both Jacob and to the reader. But still Jacob will not let go – devious Jacob – now made crooked in his body as a reminder, holds on for dear life, weeping and begging for the blessing. He is now a wrecked and wretched man as all his emotions pour out in the realisation that he has actually been wrestling God all his life. It is at this point of total surrender and submission to God’s will ¹⁶ that he becomes the victor – he overcomes his old nature and is renamed – *Israel - - God will rule.*

Israel - - “God will rule”

At this point it is crucial that we examine the meaning of Israel. Scholars have suggested many different meanings but any meaning that simply treats the naming as an aetiological outcome or an exercise in etymology without regard to the contextual setting will fail to grasp the author’s (or redactor’s) intent. The change of name reflects a change of nature or relationship. Jacob’s defeat was simultaneously also his victory. It was a victory over self, his own ego, not over his opponent. The blessing was granted, not because of, but despite of, Jacob’s strength and tenacity. Frederick Buechner has called this event ‘*The Magnificent Defeat*’.

The prophet Hosea (12:2-5) has, “*He [Jacob] had power with God*” but the RV mg renders this as, “*He strove with God*”and prevailed. Once again the context is determinative; “*He [Jacob] wept, and made supplication unto him*” -- a strange kind of victory. Ross suggests that

¹⁶ Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane has parallels with Jacob’s wrestling. Jesus is about to confront his “brother” Judas. He divides his disciples into two parties. His soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death. He separates himself and faces his agony alone (at night). He is physically discomforted by his agony (sweating as it were, ‘great drops of blood’). He asks, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup to pass away from me” The conclusion – *thy will be done.* Jesus functions here as the true Israel – unlike Jacob there was no guile in this Israelite.

the confusion between the meaning “*God strives*” (fights/contends) and “*God rules*” is due to different pointing¹⁷ but even this difference of meaning fits the contours of the narrative, for the acknowledgement of God ruling in Jacob’s life is a consequence of God contending with him. The elasticity of the pointing and translation fit the causal transitions in the text. We must add that Hosea understands Jacob’s opponent as God (*Elohim*) despite the use of the covenant *Yahweh* name in 12:5, which refers to Jacob’s memorial at Beth-el, rather than his wrestling. Wessner adds; “Therefore, despite the elaborate attempts of some scholars to explain verse 5a [in Hosea 12] as parallel to events in Jacob’s life other than his wrestling at the Jabbok (e.g., Gen 30:8), Hosea is simply referring to Jacob’s physical struggle with אֱלֹהִים and is as ambiguous about the identity of his assailant as is the narrator of the Genesis account. For Hosea, the אֱלֹהִים with whom Jacob contended is not to be understood as God himself but rather as corresponding to מַלְאָךְ, that is, a messenger sent on behalf of God.”¹⁸

The meaning “*to rule, be lord over*” derived from the weak root *sarab* is essentially the meaning allocated to it by Noth,¹⁹ and also by Alter who derives it from the same root:

¹⁷ "What is the meaning of the name "Israel"? Both Genesis 32:28 and Hosea 12:3 interpret the meaning of the name with a verb "to fight." The meaning of "Israel" would then be defined as "God contends, may God contend, persist..... Based on the context in Genesis, the verb should be understood in the sense of fighting..... Third, the versions did not all understand the distinction between שָׂרָה, "to contend," and שָׂרָר, "to rule." The Septuagint has ἐνίσχυσσας, Aquila has ἥρξας, Symmachus has ἥρξω, and the Vulgate has *fortis fuisti*. The problem may be traced to the pointing of the verb נִשָּׂר in Hosea 12:4, which seems to be from a geminate root שָׂרָר (Symmachus, Aquila, and Onkelos). As a result the versions and commentators follow either the idea of "rule" or "contend, oppose" (Josephus)."

Allen P Ross, *Studies in the Life of Jacob, Part 2: Jacob at the Jabbok, Israel at Peniel* (Bibliotheca Sacra 137, 1980), 223-40

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Wessner, 'Face to Face'

¹⁹ Noth, *Die Israelitischen Personennamen*, pp. 191. 208

“In fact names with the *el* ending generally make God the subject, not the object, of the verb in the name.²⁰ This particular verb, *sarah*, is a rare one, and there is some question about its meaning, though an educated guess about the original sense of the name would be: “God will rule”, or perhaps, “God will prevail.”²¹

Jacob the man and Israel the nation

The story of Jacob, the progenitor of the twelve tribes, is also the story of the nation. Steve McKenzie observes;

“The chiasmic structure of the Jacob cycle is significant in terms of the theme and purpose of the cycle as a whole. At the structural center of the chiasm lies the story of the birth of Jacob's children, the founders and namesakes of the twelve tribes of Israel. As various scholars have observed, the individuals, Esau and Laban, here represent the political entities of Edom and Aram, respectively. The Jacob cycle tells how the nation of Israel, represented in its ancestors Jacob and his sons, contends with Edom and Aram, represented in their ancestors Esau and Laban. It further describes how Jacob/Israel prevailed over all opponents and gained control of the land. The specifying of the children of Jacob, the fathers of the tribes of Israel, lies at the center of the narrative both structurally and functionally. The Jacob cycle is the story of the perseverance and prevalence of Israel.”²²

A comparison between the two Bethel accounts (in Genesis 28 and 35), when Jacob leaves the land and then returns some 20 years later establishes that, the very real events

²⁰ The meaning of Israel is sometimes given as “Prince (or ruler) with God” [God is here the object] instead of “God is ruler” or “God will rule” [God is here the subject of the verb] similarly Daniel means “God will judge” [God is the subject of the verb] and not, “Judge with God.”

²¹ *Ibid*, Alter, *Genesis*, p.182

²² *Ibid*, McKenzie, see n.12

in the lives of the individual patriarchs were understood as pre-figuring the actions of the tribes and were therefore prophetic of future behaviour (Gen.49: 1-4, 27), in turn the Semitic sense of community and federalism dictated that current historic realities be interpreted as a consequence of past behaviour. This is particularly true of the prophets where Jacob functions as a type of the nation.

The time of Jacob's trouble

Just as Jacob had been exiled from the land when he cheated his brother Esau – so also the nation was exiled into Babylonian captivity, but this time for robbing God;²³ the nation of Edom used this opportunity of weakness to their advantage and the prophets condemn the Edomites for their *schadenfreude*:

Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. (Ps.137:7)

Thus saith the Lord GOD; because that Edom hath dealt against the house of Judah by taking vengeance, and hath greatly offended, and revenged himself upon them.... (Ez.25:12)

In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them. But thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over

²³ “He is a merchant, the balances of deceit are in his hand: he loveth to oppress.” (Hos. 12:7) The prophecy is targeted at Israel, (ca.790-686 B.C.) who was exiled earlier than Judah. The ‘merchant’ is an allusion to Cain and ‘deceit’ a play on Jacob’s character. Later, the prophet Jeremiah accuses Judah of committing the same sins as Israel: “Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD” (Jer.7:11).

the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress.. (Obadiah vv.11-12) ²⁴

For the prophet Jeremiah, the return of the exiles was likened to Jacob coming home:

Jeremiah 30

.....**v.3** For, lo, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel and Judah, saith the LORD: and I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their fathers, and they shall possess it..... **v.6** Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child? wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, (Rachel died in childbirth) and all faces are turned into paleness? **v.7** Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble, (Jacob wrestling) but he shall be saved out of it.....**v.10** Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid.....**v.15** Why criest thou for thine affliction? (Jacob weeping at Peniel) Thy sorrow is incurable for the multitude of thine iniquity: because thy sins were increased, I have done these things unto thee. **v.18** Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I will bring again the captivity of Jacob's tents, and have mercy on his dwelling places; and the city shall be builded upon her own heap, and the palace shall remain after the manner thereof.

Jeremiah 31

²⁴ Ezekiel 25 is referring to the Babylonian invasion (and subsequent exile), Obadiah is usually thought to belong to the same period and Psalm 137 is considered a post-exilic reference to the Babylonian captivity by most commentators. However, reasons have been offered to suggest that Psalm 137 is pre-exilic (possibly with late glosses) and also Obadiah – both belonging to the time of Hezekiah. If this is the case we are observing a repeated pattern of behavior by Edom towards Israel; a “*perpetual hatred.*” Edom apparently either joined Israel’s invaders (like Nebuchadnezzar) by sending mercenaries, or sat on the side lines gloating and plundering.

.....v.7 For thus saith the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. v.8 Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind (Isaac's blindness to the covenant) and the lame (Jacob made lame), the woman with child (Zilpah, Leah's maid pregnant with Gad?) and her that travaileth with child together (Rachel): a great company (the meaning of 'Gad' in Gen.30:11) shall return thither. v.9 They shall come with weeping, and with supplications (Jacob weeps and makes supplication to his opponent) will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters (Jabbok) in a straight way (crooked Jacob), wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. v.10 Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock. v.11 For the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he (Esau)..... v.15 Thus saith the LORD; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping; Rachel weeping for her children (give me children, else I die – Gen.30:1) refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not. v.16 Thus saith the LORD; Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. v.17 And there is hope in thine end, saith the LORD, that thy children shall come again to their own border.....

And so Jacob personifies the nation's struggles – but this chapter in Jeremiah's prophecy ends on a positive note, for it speaks of the time when Yahweh will establish a New Covenant with Jacob.

Conclusion

The comments made by Alter on the change of Jacob's name are worth repeating: "Abraham's change of name was a mere rhetorical flourish compared to this one, for of all the patriarchs Jacob is the one whose life is entangled in moral ambiguities. Rashi beautifully catches the resonance of the name change: "It will no longer be said that the blessing came to you through deviousness [*oqbab*, a word suggested by the radical of "crookedness" in the name of Jacob] but instead through lordliness [*serarah*, a root that can be extracted from the name Israel] and openness." It is nevertheless noteworthy – and to my knowledge has not been noted – *that the pronouncement of the new name has not been*

fulfilled. Whereas Abraham is invariably called “Abraham” once the name is changed from “Abram”, the narrative continues to refer to this patriarch in most instances as “Jacob.” Thus, “Israel” does not really replace his name but becomes a synonym for it – a practice reflected in the parallelism of biblical poetry, where “Jacob” is always used in the first half of the line and “Israel,” the poetic variation, in the second half.”²⁵

Indeed, “the pronouncement of the new name has not been fulfilled” - - for although “Jacob” has struggled with his Semitic brethren in six wars since returning to the land, there remains a final bitter wrestling. “Jacob’s” opponents have declared their own route to the blessing – through Ishmael to Abraham (regarded as a Muslim prophet). The blessing is therefore still in contention; is it the “chosen” nation or their Semitic brethren who have founded a powerful world religion based on their common ancestor? However, the God of Jacob has made a New Covenant with his people; a covenant that was only taken up by a small remnant in the first century. This New Covenant established a New Israel, the twelve disciples of the Messiah presenting a fresh beginning, not based on exclusivity, but on the universal extension of the covenant relationship, as originally promised to Abraham. This covenant, if accepted, ends Jacob’s struggle with the “law” with his “brethren” and with his God. The New Covenant is a covenant of grace not of wrestling – it absorbs and fulfils all previous covenants, even the law, which will be written in their hearts.

Once again, Jacob will meet his nemesis in the “day of Jacob’s trouble”²⁶ he will also suffer in extremis when he encounters his Arab “brother” in the last day. But he will overcome, for the Living God has so ordained; with weeping, tears and supplications he will once more see the face of his God:

²⁵ *Ibid*, Alter, *Genesis*, p.182

²⁶ A similar phrase is used to describe the Assyrian invasion in the time of Hezekiah: “*And they said unto him, Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and blasphemy: for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth*” (2 Kgs.19:3). This day of trouble was like Jacob’s wrestling – the nation like Rachel, was in danger of dying in childbirth. These are the birth pangs of Messiah (the Son of sorrow); Hezekiah was about to die childless - - leaving no heir to the Abrahamic covenants.

And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn. (Zech.12:10)

His victory will not be over his Arab brother, but over his old nature, only then will “the pronouncement of his name be fulfilled” - - he will rule as a “Prince with God”, together with the man who is the true Israel.

“O Lord GOD, forgive, I beseech thee: by whom shall Jacob arise? For he is small (7:2).....Then said I, O Lord GOD, cease, I beseech thee: by whom shall Jacob arise? For he is small.” (Amos 7:5)

Amen