



At PENIEL

The Jabbok River,
outside of modern
Amman, Jordan.

By Kevin Hall

THE FORD AT THE RIVER Jabbok had always been a strategic location. What transpired at Peniel, the site of Jacob's crossing, however, forever marked the place and a people with a significance difficult to comprehend

much less calculate. For the face of God was seen, and a man and his descendants were forever changed.

The Place

Several times the Bible mentions the ancient site of Peniel (also spelled Penuel). Located east of the Jordan River near Mahanaim (meaning “two

camps”), a place near the crest of the Jabbok Valley from which Jacob sent messengers with gifts to seek Esau's favor before the fateful reunion (Gen. 32:1-5), Peniel apparently marked a strategic ford of the Jabbok River.¹ For example, Gideon's pursuit of the Midianite kings Zeba and Zalmunna took him through Penuel,



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ WALTERS ART MUSEUM/ BALTIMORE (75/0091)

“Your name...will be Israel,” he was told by his wrestling partner, “because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed.”

which at that time was fortified with a tower (Judg. 8:1-21). But the meaning of its name suggests its true significance. Jacob, we are told, named it Peniel, “the Face of God,” because in his own words “I have seen God face to face” (Gen. 32:30).

The Struggle

Jacob, the younger twin to Esau, had been wrestling with others his entire life. As a matter of fact, his strife with his own brother had begun in their mother’s womb (25:22-26). Later, after convincing his brother to sell him his birthright and deceiving their father into giving him the blessing belonging to Esau, Jacob fled in fear of his brother’s wrath. For refuge, Jacob fled to Aram, the land of his ancestors, and lived with his uncle Laban. Being a man as shrewd in matters of kinship and one-up-man-ship as Jacob, however, Laban taxed Jacob’s cunning to its limits. Jacob even recognized that he hardly earned, much less deserved, what he had finally

Above: Cista handle in the form of two wrestlers; bronze; 4th–3rd centuries B.C.

Right: Landscape outside of Petra, which is in the region of ancient Edom. Esau came from Edom to meet his brother.



gained at Laban’s expense (32:10).

So when Jacob approached the Jabbok, we are not surprised to see him wrestle with a man. But what does catch us off guard is the fact that Jacob’s experience with this “man” leads to Jacob’s recognition that he has seen God’s face.

Hebrew narrative is known for its intentional use of ambiguity.² The intent is never to create confusion; rather, the narrator can provide particular details that provoke reflection and prompt questions that are ultimately instructive. In the story of Jacob at Peniel (vv. 24-32), one important detail coaxes the careful reader into such

reflection. Though it is evident by Jacob’s response to the encounter that Jacob had wrestled with God—indeed he is named “Israel,” meaning “One Who Struggles with God”—the text only says he wrestled with a “man” (v. 24).

If we are willing to wrestle with this word choice as Jacob wrestled with the man and do not move too quickly to possible explanations,³ we are likely to discover as Jacob did that in all his trials—he had been engaged in a struggle with God and man. Through these divine/human encounters he had ultimately been blessed with victory. “I will not let You go unless



Right: Aramean orthostat relief depicting a figure in procession; basalt; from Tell Ahmar (ancient

Til Barsip), Syria; dated to the 9th cent. B.C. Laban, the Aramean, was Jacob's father-in-law.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/LOUVRE/ PARIS (2/4/28)



Left: God-face carved in stone at Petra.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (8/18/11)

You bless me," Jacob had said as daybreak approached (v. 26, HCSB). "Your name...will be Israel," he was told by his wrestling partner, "because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed" (v. 28, HCSB).

What It Means to Be Israel

The story of Jacob at Peniel gave the people called Israel a sense of destiny. When their namesake's mother complained of the struggle in her womb, the Lord told her, "Two nations are in your womb" (25:23, HCSB). And from that epic beginning, the story of Jacob taught them other aspects of what

it meant to be Israel. How could Jacob's descendants not find Jacob's tenacious pursuit of divine blessing inspiring? What citizen of Israel would not find in Jacob's rivalry with Laban the Aramean a wrenching reminder that before the kingdoms of Israel and Aram fought for advantage over each other, their ancestors had been "wandering Arameans" (Deut. 26:5)? And what faithful son of Israel would not resonate with Jacob's humble recognition that for all his (Jacob's) striving and cunning, God's faithfulness had been the key to victory? And surely no one who could see in Jacob's struggles their own trials could look upon the limping victor at Peniel and not acknowledge that an encounter with God always leaves its mark.

The real evidence that the newly named Israel was changed, however, comes in the story of the next day. Approaching the brother he once sought to master, Jacob offered himself in service to Esau. "My lord," he called Esau (Gen. 33:8). "Your servant," he called himself (v. 5). At the heart of this transformation was the encounter at Peniel. Having wrestled with a man and having seen the face

of God, Jacob looked upon his brother and said, "I have seen your face, and it is like seeing God's face" (v. 10).

When we look into the face of those with whom we wrestle, whose face do we see? The Israelite who said, "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father," also said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me" (John 14:9; Matt. 25:40). May we thus see Jesus in the smallest of our deeds and the most insignificant of our encounters and be blessed to know more fully the One whose face we have seen in Christ and in our neighbor. 🕯

1. Thomas Brisco, *The Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1998), 48-49.

2. See L. Daniel Hawk, "Literary/Narrative Criticism" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 536-44.

3. To posit as some do that the "man" was the pre-incarnate Christ seems unnecessary. And while it is certainly important to take note of the fact that Hosea 12:4 says that Jacob struggled with an angel, it is equally important to note that "angel" is a translation of the Hebrew term *malakh* which means "messenger," a term the Old Testament often used to refer to a human being.

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