

STRUCTURE, STYLE AND CONTEXT AS A KEY TO INTERPRETING JACOB'S ENCOUNTER AT PENIEL

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As evangelicals we have long affirmed that the events described in Scripture took place as they are reported by the Biblical authors. Even as we have argued vigorously for the historicity of the Biblical narrative we have recognized that there is another element of crucial significance as well. We not only want to know what God has done in the past; we also need to know what the acts of God mean. Thus both event and interpretation of the event are of great significance, and evangelicals have recognized that the Bible contains both of these important elements. Marten Woudstra has pointed out that "orthodox Biblical scholarship has not been unmindful of the fact that the events of sacred history are reported to us in the Bible within a certain interpretive context, a context which lets the full light of God's revelation fall upon the events."¹

We recognize that books such as Job and Ruth are literary masterpieces, and we readily acknowledge that the inspired authors of those books were literary geniuses. A careful study of much of the Biblical narrative material makes it clear that there are many indications of literary sophistication throughout that material as well. It is the contention of this paper that the literary structure and style of the Biblical narrative often provide somewhat subtle but extremely effective clues to the interpretation of the events recounted in the text. Sometimes literary clues provide keys to the structure of a passage.² The repetition of certain words may underscore the emphasis of a passage³ or may correlate the passage with related passages elsewhere.⁴ Oc-

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¹M. H. Woudstra, "Event and Interpretation in the Old Testament," in *Interpreting God's Word Today* (ed. S. Kistemaker; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) 55.

²E.g. the *tôlédôt* sections of Genesis, the clearly structured sermons in Amos, or the rhetorical-question format that defines the structure of Malachi. For other examples see W. C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 69-79.

³E.g., the repetition of the word *bārā'* three times in Gen 1:27 effectively makes the point that man is the special creation of God.

⁴E.g., in Ruth 3:17 Ruth returns from the threshing floor with grain for Naomi and tells her that Boaz instructed her not to return "empty" (*rêqām*) to her mother-in-law. This seems to connect back to Naomi's complaint in 1:21 that she had gone out full but Yahweh brought her back "empty" (*rêqām*). Campbell (AB) has suggested that the repetition of this word is the author's way of saying that now the days of Naomi's emptiness are coming to an end. In Gen 14:20 Melchizedek praises God as the one who delivered (*miggên*) Abram from his enemies. In 15:1 Abram is afraid, and Yahweh says to him, "Do not fear; I am a deliverer (*māgên*) to you." The repetition of the root *mgn* suggests that it was Yahweh's past activity on Abram's behalf that should provide the basis for present trust in Yahweh—a trust that would eliminate Abram's fear.

asionally the literary structure or the interruption of the structure may provide an interpretively significant clue to some aspect of the meaning.⁵ A recognition of these literary elements is an important part of proper exegesis in that they often constitute an inner-Biblical commentary on the text that has been provided by the inspired writer himself. And, as Michael Fishbane has noted, these rhetorical features provide an "empirical peg for the interpretation of content."⁶ Interpretive clues of this sort are especially important since OT narrative rarely provides an explicit statement of the meaning of the events described.⁷ Literary clues assume even greater significance because they occur as an integral part of the interpretive context in which the events are reported.

The purpose of this study will be to point out the presence of a number of rhetorical devices in the story of Jacob's encounter at Peniel and his subsequent meeting with his brother Esau and to show how those literary elements provide significant clues for the interpretation of a passage that Luther called "one of the most obscure in the Old Testament."⁸

Fishbane has shown that there is a clear structure into which all the incidents about Jacob have been arranged,⁹ and an awareness of that structure is important in understanding the relationships among the various incidents. Not only is there a relationship between the several incidents related about Jacob, but these stories are also part of the broader context of the book of Genesis, a context dominated by the theme of the promise to Abraham and its fulfillment. The stories about Jacob must not be viewed in isolation. Rather, the theme of the entire section is Jacob and his relation to the promise.

One theme that recurs frequently in the Genesis narratives is the contrast between the work of man and the work of God, and that theme appears to be important in interpreting the stories about Jacob. The theme is clearly illustrated in the story of the tower of Babel, a story outside the patriarchal narratives but, nonetheless, having a clear literary connection with the beginning of the story of Abraham. The men who built the city and tower in Genesis 11 did it with the stated purpose of making a name for themselves,¹⁰ and the passage contains numerous indications that Yahweh overturned the efforts of

⁵In Genesis 1 a clear structure is utilized for the recounting of the events of creation. This structure involves an announcement ("and God said"), a command ("let there be"), a report ("and it was so"), an evaluation ("God saw that it was good") and a temporal framework ("a third day," etc.). When the creation of man is related the pattern is interrupted, thus effectively calling attention to man, the climax of God's creative activity.

⁶M. Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19—35:22)," *JJS* 26 (1975) 21.

⁷R. Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981] 21) says that when one is dealing with a text "so bare of embellishment and explicit commentary, one must be constantly aware of . . . features . . . through which one part of the text provides oblique commentary on another."

⁸As cited by H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1942), 2. 875. Leupold concurs with the opinion.

⁹Fishbane, "Composition" 20.

¹⁰Gen 11:4.

men.¹¹ What they designed as “a gate of god” (*bābel*)¹² was from God’s perspective “confusion” (*bālal*), and God’s disposition of the whole project was to disperse the people and confuse their languages. God thwarted the design of man to make a name for himself, but in the very next chapter God’s call to Abram includes the words “I will make your name great.”¹³ This principle that man’s efforts fail while the work that God does succeeds is seen a number of times in the subsequent chapters.¹⁴

The principle is evident in the fulfillment of the promise of descendants for Abraham. In chap. 15 Abram suggested that an heir might be secured through adoption since there had been no indication that the problem of Sarai’s barrenness was being resolved. In chap. 16 Abram tried to contribute to the fulfillment of the promise by fathering a child through Sarai’s handmaid Hagar. In both cases God rejected Abram’s help, and he developed a set of circumstances that would leave no doubt that the birth of Isaac was divine work rather than simply the result of human sexual activity. Thus the point seems to be made clearly and emphatically: The promise of God will be fulfilled by God himself, and human initiative will not play a role in that fulfillment.¹⁵

The events related in Genesis 32–33 are preceded by several important incidents. In a pre-birth oracle Rebekah was informed that the younger twin, Jacob, was the son through whom the promise would be transmitted. Despite this revelation and the fact that Jacob had apparently secured a legal claim to the birthright through the bartering of food, Isaac’s intention was to give the birthright and blessing to Esau. Rebekah devised a plan that Jacob implemented in order to deprive Esau of the blessing. Esau was determined to kill

¹¹J. P. Fokkelman (*Narrative Art in Genesis* [Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975]) has pointed out many of these literary devices. For a shorter study of the passage see A. P. Ross, “The Dispersion of the Nations in Genesis 11:1–9,” *BSac* 138 (1981) 119–138. Perhaps the most striking device used in the passage is the reversal of consonants in the word used by the people in 11:3, “Let us make bricks” (*niḇēnā*), when God responds in 11:7 by saying, “Let us confuse” (*nābēlā*). The reversal of consonants actually illustrates the point of the passage: God will thwart the intentions of man by turning their project into “confusion” or “folly.”

¹²*Bāb ili* means “gate of god” in Akkadian and is given as a popular etymology of the name Babylon in late Akkadian literature.

¹³Gen 12:3.

¹⁴In chap. 13 Lot and Abram separate. Lot “lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of the Jordan . . . and Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan” (vv 10–11). Lot, of course, subsequently lost all the land he chose for himself. God then told Abram, “Lift your eyes and see . . . to the north, south, east and west; indeed, all the land which you see I will give to you and your descendants forever” (vv 14–15). In 14:21 the king of Sodom tells Abram to take the goods (*hārēkūš*) for himself. Abram, however, refuses to take even a thread or sandal strap from the king of Sodom so he could not say, “I have made Abram rich.” In 15:14 God reaffirms the promise to Abram and tells him that after a period of oppression outside the land his descendants will come out “with great goods” (*rēkūš gādōl*).

¹⁵It is interesting to note that God’s fulfillment of the promise not only does not depend on human initiative and effort but is not thwarted by human stupidity and deceit. When Abram’s lie about Sarai resulted in her being taken into Pharaoh’s harem God simply extricated them from that predicament. God did not allow the fulfillment of the promise to be thwarted even when the stupidity of the human recipient of the promise created a major threat to its realization.

Jacob for his trickery, and Jacob had to flee to Haran where Rebekah's relatives lived. Just before Jacob left the land he stopped at Bethel. God, despite the way Jacob had wrested the blessing from Esau, confirmed to him that he was still the recipient of the promise given to Abraham. Both by temperament and no doubt by training as well Jacob seems to have been an independent and self-sufficient individual. He clearly was not unaware of God and of his need for God's help, but he basically lived by the principle that God helps those who help themselves. Jacob's time in Haran demonstrated the futility of that philosophy, and he prospered during his time there despite experiencing more than one reversal at the hands of Laban. Finally the word of God came to Jacob: "Return to the land of your fathers. . . . I will be with you."¹⁶ Jacob still had to face a major obstacle to his return to the land: He had to meet Esau, who had earlier vowed to kill him.

Genesis 32—33 deals with that meeting between the two brothers and with the events that immediately preceded it. We must acknowledge that these chapters are filled with numerous ambiguities,¹⁷ and this study will by no means resolve them all. It does appear, however, that the contours for interpreting the incidents can be established by observing the literary connectors and themes in the narrative, and this approach seems to provide a somewhat objective basis for the exegesis of the passage. The literary structure that Fishbane has identified in the Jacob stories makes it clear that the incidents involving the angels in Genesis 32 balance and contrast with the incident at Bethel in chap. 28. The parallels between the two chapters are apparent. The Bethel incident took place immediately before Jacob left Canaan, while the incidents in chap. 32 took place immediately before Jacob entered the land again. In both instances *mal'ākīm* ("angels") were encountered by Jacob, and in both chapters the verb *pāga'* ("meet, encounter") is used. When Jacob saw the group of angels he identified it as a camp of God (*maḥānēh 'ēlōhīm*), and he named the place Mahanaim. There is ambiguity here in that it is unclear whether the presence of the angels is indicative of God's help for Jacob or whether it points toward an impending battle between Jacob and Esau.¹⁸

Jacob's response to seeing the *mal'ākīm* ("angels") was to send his own *mal'ākīm* ("messengers") to Esau.¹⁹ Given what we know of Jacob at this point it seems likely that the repetition of the word *mal'ākīm* is intended to make the point that Jacob was trying to do the same thing that God was doing. He

¹⁶Gen 31:3.

¹⁷There are perhaps several reasons for this. Fokkelman, *Narrative* 201, has suggested that this is a deliberate part of the narrative technique in order to reproduce for the reader some of the same suspense that Jacob experienced throughout this period. The ambiguity also stimulates us to think about the incidents and their implications in a way that a transparent account might not. Leupold, *Exposition* 880, suggests that the mystery surrounding these incidents attests to the profundity of the events. He says, "A spiritual experience so lucid that a man sees through it and is able to analyze every part of it must be shallow."

¹⁸This ambiguity is an effective way of reproducing for the reader some of the tension that Jacob must have experienced as he anticipated his coming meeting with Esau.

¹⁹Gen 32:4.

anticipated the possibility of a hostile encounter with Esau, and even if he understood the camp of God as indicating that God's help was available for him in that confrontation there is no indication that he intended to depend on that help. Jacob's *mal'ākīm* returned with the message that Esau was coming to meet him with four hundred men, and Jacob was greatly afraid when he heard the news.²⁰ Again there is ambiguity in that there is no explicit statement as to Esau's intention. The clear implication is that Esau was not coming in peace, and certainly Jacob anticipated that Esau intended to attack his group. Again the appearance of the two camps shortly before seems to have given Jacob an idea as to how he could at least minimize the damage from Esau's attack, and he divided his group into two camps (*šné maḥānôt*) with the hope that at least one camp would be able to escape. Jacob also prayed to God for deliverance, though one wonders if it was only the magnitude of the crisis that prompted the prayer. Jacob's prayer is clearly related to God's promise to him in 28:13–15, and he seems to be calling on God to honor his promise of some twenty years before.

If Jacob's prayer reflects a certain degree of dependence on God for deliverance from the obstacle that Esau posed to his receipt of the land promised to Abraham, Jacob's next move shows that his dependence on God was only partial. Jacob selected a present for Esau and set out to deliver it to his brother in three stages. The servants with the gift were divided into three groups, and a space was kept between the groups so that just after Esau met the first servant with part of the gift he would meet the second and then after a brief interval the third. There is no ambiguity as to Jacob's intent in sending the gift: "For he said, 'I will appease him with the present that goes before me. Then afterward I will see his face; perhaps he will accept me.'"²¹ It appears that the prayer did not change Jacob's basic approach to solving his problem. This seems to be the same approach that Jacob took to get the birthright. The only difference is that the price has gone up, and he will now have to offer more than just food.

Jacob took his family across the Jabbok that night. He was left alone, and the text of Gen 32:22–32 relates one of the most enigmatic incidents in all of Scripture. Jacob wrestled with a "man" until daybreak. We are not told the identity of the man. As Fokkelman notes: "We can only learn this adversary's identity by judging him by his words and actions as Jacob does."²² The struggle between the two men continued, and when the man saw that he could not prevail against Jacob he caused Jacob's thigh to be thrown out of socket. It seems probable that this was the point at which Jacob realized that his adver-

²⁰Note again the parallel with Gen 28:17. As a result of the vision of the *mal'ākīm* moving up and down the ladder Jacob was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place!" It seems ironic that the return of the messengers sent by Jacob to appease Esau likewise resulted in his being afraid.

²¹Gen 32:20.

²²Fokkelman, *Narrative* 213. He says that in the word *'iš* "a very general, meaningless word has been chosen which suggests a mystery but reveals nothing."

sary was more than an ordinary "man."²³ One wonders if Jacob's determination in the struggle did not take a different direction at this point as he realized that his adversary was in fact God himself.²⁴ Fokkelman is probably correct in suggesting that if Jacob had in the beginning realized that his opponent was God "he probably would not have pursued the fight with all his might with that persistence peculiar to him."²⁵ It seems likely that Jacob was no longer intent on defeating his opponent but rather on receiving a blessing from God.²⁶ In response to Jacob's plea (or, some would say, demand) for blessing, the adversary informed Jacob that his name would be changed to Israel. Again the ambiguity that runs through this chapter is evident with respect to the meaning of the name Israel. On the basis of the explanation of the name given in v 29 (28 English) many have concluded that the name means "he struggles with God" or "he prevails with God."²⁷ This, however, runs against the analogy of other names involving an imperfect verb and a theophoric element since in virtually all those instances the theophoric element is the subject of the verb rather than the object. Thus it appears that Noth²⁸ is correct in concluding that God is the subject of the verb here as well. The name then probably means something like "may God struggle/fight" or "may God prevail," and perhaps James Boice is correct in seeing v 29 as irony:

With men Jacob had contended successfully . . . and lost. He cheated Esau of the blessing but lost Esau's good will. He outwitted his blind and ailing father but lost his good name. None of these victories had brought satisfaction, and now on the banks of the Jabbok he is bottled up between enemies. He even has God for his antagonist. However, in his battle with God Jacob suffers a reversal of his fortunes which is actually his victory. He loses his wrestling match with God;

²³It seems to the present author that one can acknowledge that Jacob was probably a man of great physical strength without in any way accepting the fanciful interpretations that are a part of Jewish tradition and without seeing any mythological strata behind these stories. The fact that Jacob moved the stone from the well at Haran when apparently several men were normally needed to do that (Gen 29:3-10) suggests this, as does the fact that he was able to continue the wrestling match all night. Perhaps the fact that the man was able to continue the struggle without being defeated made Jacob aware that this was a most unusual man. When he simply touched Jacob (though admittedly the word *nāga'* can refer to more than a gentle touch) and caused his hip to come out of socket Jacob no doubt realized that this "man" had resources at his disposal to end the struggle in an instant if he so desired.

²⁴On the basis of the interpretation of this incident found in Hos 12:3-4 one can be a bit more precise and identify his opponent as the angel of the Lord. Depending on how one identified the angel of the Lord the identification can perhaps be refined beyond that.

²⁵Fokkelman, *Narrative* 213.

²⁶As is suggested by the Hosea passage.

²⁷E.g. Leupold, *Exposition* 879.

²⁸M. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966) 208. Noth says that based on the rules of Israelite and Semitic name formations there can be no doubt at all that the name is formed with an imperfect verb and a noun and that the noun is the subject. He concludes that the opinion that God is the object "fällt von vornherein ausser Betracht."

God touches his hip and he is permanently wounded. But in the divine logic, which is beyond our full comprehension, this loss is Jacob's victory. He wins by losing and is now able to go on in new strength as God's man.²⁹

Jacob's own interpretation of his encounter is found in v 31 (30 English) where he names the place Peniel because "I have seen God face to face (*pānīm 'el pānīm*) and my life has been delivered" (*wattinnāṣēl*—the same verb that Jacob used in his prayer in v 12 for deliverance from Esau). It appears from this statement that Jacob understood his adversary as God himself.

It is generally recognized that this experience represents a decisive turning point in the life of Jacob. Sarna, for example, says, "The major significance of the episode derives . . . from the change of name that resulted. This . . . portends a new destiny, effectuates a decisive break with the past and inaugurates a fresh role, all symbolized here by the substitution of Israel for Jacob."³⁰ It seems likely that the change in Jacob did include a moral dimension, since in the subsequent meeting with Esau there is little evidence of the trickery and bribery that had characterized Jacob before. But it is equally clear that Jacob's moral transformation was not complete, since he told Esau that he would follow him to Seir when in fact he went to Succoth instead. The context of the book of Genesis and the structure of the passage do, however, seem to point to the real nature of the transformation in Jacob.

One of the basic themes of these narratives in Genesis is the promise to the patriarchs and its fulfillment, and it appears that this incident in the life of Jacob must be interpreted in that context as well. The revelation of God to Jacob at Bethel focused on Jacob as the heir of the promise, and God's instruction to Jacob in 31:3 seems to be based on that fact also. The events of Genesis 32—33 occur as Jacob is again ready to enter the land that was an integral part of the promise.³¹ Jacob was ready to receive the promise, but his entire life had been characterized by his determination to seize the promise and the blessing for himself. The contrast between the work of God and the work of man that is evident at various points in the narrative seems to come to a focus for Jacob at this point with respect to his occupation of the land. The incident at Jabbok brought him to the awareness that the fulfillment of the promise must be the work of God rather than the work of Jacob. He came to see the difference between receiving the inheritance as a gift and gaining the inheritance through his own powers. This observation may, then, clarify both the significance and the ambiguity of the name change. God struggles with Jacob, and in the process Jacob prevails—not in the sense that he overcomes God but rather in the sense that by recognizing his dependence on God he is now able to receive the promise and the blessing of God to Abraham. God brought Jacob

²⁹J. Boice, "Wrestling With God," *Bible Studies Magazine* (March 1983) 24.

³⁰N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966) 206. Note also the comment of J. Kodell ("Jacob Wrestles With Esau," *BTB* 10 [1980] 65): "In the scholarly consensus, the episode portrays an experience of the divine through which Jacob becomes a changed person."

³¹Sarna, *Understanding* 206, says, "Is it not remarkable that Jacob's nocturnal encounter with the angel and the change of name to Israel should occur precisely at the moment he crosses the boundary into the first territory of the promised land to be occupied in the future by the people of Israel?"

to the place of dependence on him, and the subsequent account of Jacob's meeting with Esau seems to confirm this interpretation of the incident.

The study by Fishbane has made it clear that Jacob's meeting Esau in Genesis 33 balances and contrasts with the story of his securing the blessing in 27:1—28:9. Jacob—perhaps on the basis of the pre-birth oracle that the older would serve the younger—tricked Esau out of the *bērākā* ("blessing") in chap. 27. In chap. 33 Jacob, no doubt still limping from his struggle the night before, came to Esau, prostrated himself before his brother and presented himself as "your servant"³² before "my lord."³³ In 33:11 Jacob even called the present that he had for Esau *birkāti*, "my blessing" (the same word used for "blessing" in chap. 27), though he uses the more common word for "present" (*minḥā*) in v 10. It is impossible to know exactly what Jacob's motive was in this approach, but the context appears to favor the opinion that Jacob was now meeting Esau apart from his old schemes and was depending on God to bring him safely through the reunion with Esau.³⁴ The statement of Jacob in v 10 seems to tie chaps. 32 and 33 together and provides a significant clue for the interpretation of the incident at the Jabbok. In 32:21 Jacob stated his reason for sending his gifts to Esau: "I will appease him (literally 'cover his face') with my gift . . . and afterwards I will see his face. Perhaps he will accept me (literally 'lift my face')." It seems clear that Jacob meant to solve the problem of Esau's expected hostility through the presents that he was sending. In 32:31 Jacob named the place Peniel because "I have seen God face to face and my life was spared." After the struggle at the Jabbok Jacob realized that his success in possessing the land must be effected by God, and his encounter with Esau then became a test of that. As Jacob was reunited with Esau and the expected hostile confrontation failed to materialize, Jacob attributed the change to the work of God. He said to Esau, "I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably."³⁵ This expression ties Jacob's original intention in 32:21 with the encounter with God at the Jabbok and with the encounter with Esau. The acceptance of Jacob which he saw on the face of Esau recalled for him the events at Peniel and confirmed for him that it was God who had changed Esau's heart to make it friendly. Thus the struggle at Peniel was a decisive experience in the life of Jacob in which he was taught by God that the realization of the promise must be effected by God rather than by human effort and initiative. The subsequent meeting with Esau was a test case for Jacob in that he saw clearly that God would do what he had promised as he overcame a major obstacle to Jacob's return to the land entirely apart from the schemes and devices of Jacob.

³²Gen 33:5.

³³Gen 33:8.

³⁴In contrast to this suggestion Fishbane, "Composition" 26—27, says that Jacob "is ever yet the trickster. He arranges his camp to deceive his brother . . . he rushes to him and kisses him . . . Jacob offers a gift to Esau." In a text as concise as this it is only the context that can provide the basis for interpretation.

³⁵Gen 33:10.

This section of the Jacob story is filled with ambiguity and uncertainty that make a variety of interpretations of these events possible. It is the contention of this study that careful attention to literary structure, rhetorical devices and context provides significant clues to the meaning of these incidents. The utilization of these clues, while not removing all the uncertainties surrounding the interpretation of these difficult passages, does provide an objective basis for establishing the general contours of the meaning intended by the Biblical author.