The Intersection of the Human and the Divine in Genesis 32–33

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Abstract:

A motif that runs throughout the reunion scene of Genesis 32–33 is the intersection of the human and the divine. The present article highlights this literary theme, exploring structural, linguistic, and narrative resonances that, both implicitly and explicitly, direct the reader's attention to this motif and its significance in these chapters.

1. Introduction

The account of the reunion of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 32–33 is complex on a number of levels.[1] Along with various historical and source-critical difficulties, the scene has long been

[1] The present work follows the Hebrew versification of chapter 32, and is concerned primarily with 32:1–33:11. Helpful studies on Genesis 32–33 include Thomas Römer, "Genèse 32,2–22 : Préparation d'une Rencontre," in *Jacob: Commentaire à plusieurs voix de Gen. 25–36*, *Mélanges offerts à Albert de Pury*, ed. Jean-Daniel Macchi and Thomas Römer, MdB 44 (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2001), 181–196; Konrad Schmid, "Die Versöhnung zwischen Jakob und Esau (Gen. 33,1–11)," in Macchi and Römer, *Jacob: Commentaire à plusieurs voix,* 211–26; Erhard Blum, "Genesis 33,12–20: Die Wege Trennen Sich," in

noted for its narrative ambiguities that raise questions concerning the motivations of the characters, as well as for the various word plays and motifs found throughout the account which require sustained attention.[2]

Macchi and Römer, *Jacob: Commentaire à plusieurs voix,* 232–233; Jeremy M. Hutton, "Jacob's 'Two Camps' and Transjordanian Geography: Wrestling with Order in Genesis 32," *ZAW* 122 (2010): 20–32; Edward J. Bridge, "The 'Slave' is the 'Master': Jacob's Servile Language to Esau in Genesis 33.1–17," *JSOT* 38 (2014): 263–78. Major commentaries that offer reflections on the texts and issues here under discussion include Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* [1901], trans. Mark E. Biddle (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 285–380; Benno Jacob, *Das Erste Buch Der Tora: Genesis. Ubersetzt und Erklärt* (Berlin: Schocken, 1934), 541–650; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed., trans. J.H. Marks, OTL (London: SCM, 1972), 264–347; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 204–87; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society,1989), 177–254; Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:516–91; Clause Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 410–569; J. Alberto Soggin, *Das Buch Genesis, Kommentar* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 341–402; Horst Seebass, *Genesis II/2. Vätergeschichte II (23,1–36,43)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999), 377–411; Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 228–310.

[2] For a helpful introduction to these issues, see Erhard Blum, "The Jacob Tradition," in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen, VTSup 152 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 181–211 (187–190).

One such theme is the intersection of the human and the divine in these chapters, a motif which manifests itself in a number of ways. Readers through the years have pointed out various aspects of this idea;[3] however, the extent and thoroughgoingness of this theme, I suggest, has not received due attention. Thus, in what follows I explore the various ways in which this divine-human intersection can be seen in Genesis 32–33, particularly in terms of structural, linguistic, and narrative resonances.

2. Structural Resonance

To begin with, it is worth noting a structural issue which highlights the divine-human framework of Genesis 32–33, and which connects this scene to the larger cycle of stories concerning Jacob.[4] The chapters preceding those under discussion (28:10–32:1) recount

[3] See, for example, Kevin Walton, *Thou Unknown Traveller: The Presence and Absence of God in the Jacob Narrative* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003), 195–197. As Walton notes, "in this episode, behind the dialectical structure of the divine-human, the divine and human are also closely connected, as Jacob's relationship with God and his relationship with Esau impinge on each other" (197). Indeed, it is this multilayeredness that I have in mind with the term *intersection*, encompassing structural-dialectical issues, along with associations and equations found within the text.

[4] Significant studies on the Jacob Cycle include Michael A. Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen. 25:19–35:22)," *JJS* 26 (1975): 15–38, reprinted in *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1979), 40-62; Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, WMANT 57 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1980); Albert de Pury, "Le Cycle de Jacob Comme Légende Autonome des Origines d'Israël," in *Congress Volume: Leuven 1989*, ed. J.A. Emerton (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 78–96. More recently, see Lévi Ngangura Manyanya, *La fraternité de Jacob et d'Esaü (Gn*

Jacob fleeing for his life following his deceptive acquisition of Esau's blessing in Genesis 27, leaving his homeland to live with his uncle Laban for what turns out to be twenty years. In spite of a tumultuous relationship, Genesis 32 begins with Jacob finally having separated in a relatively peaceful manner from his uncle Laban, after what has been an anxious run up to the ending to the Laban narratives (31:51–54). Jacob's separation from Laban has a number of corresponding similarities with the Esau encounter;[5] however, more interesting for the present study is the fact that these two tension-filled encounters with kin bookend Jacob's meeting with the opponent at the Jabbok, highlighting that Jacob is indeed one who struggles with both God and humanity, as will be noted by the stranger at the Jabbok when changing Jacob's name in Gen 32:28.

3. Linguistic Resonances: Messengers and Camps, Gift and Favour

As noted above, there are a number of linguistic issues and word plays found throughout these chapters, and several of these also highlight the intersection of the divine and the human.

25–36): Quel frère aîné pour Jacob? (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2009); John E. Anderson, *Jacob and the Divine Trickster: A Theology of Deception and YHWH's Fidelity to the Ancestral Promise in the Jacob Cycle,* Siphrut 5 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011); Bradford A. Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance: A Canonical Reading of the Esau and Edom Traditions,* LHBOTS 556 (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2011).

[5] On the similarities of the separations from Laban and Esau, see I.L. Seeligmann, "Hebräische Erzählung und biblische Geschichtsschreibung," *TZ* 18 (1962): 305–325 (309).

To begin with, in Gen 32:2a we read that as Jacob moves on from Laban, “angels of God (מלאכי אלהים) met him.”[6] The fact that this meeting occurs so close to the Jabbok encounter might lead us to consider the relation of the two. However, this encounter seems to have more resonance with the scene at Bethel in Genesis 28.[7] One reason for this is that, outside of Gen 32:2, the phrase מלאכי אלהים only occurs in 28:12, in the description of the heavenly beings Jacob sees on the ladder ascending to heaven.[8] Thus, positive encounters with מלאכי אלהים mark off Jacob’s journey away from and his return to the land of promise.[9] And yet, while it seems clear that the messengers of 32:2 are divine beings or angels, it is noteworthy that immediately following his encounter with the מלאכי אלהים, Jacob sends messengers of his

[6] All translations are my own. Some Targumic traditions comment here on the Laban and Esau encounters, while simultaneously drawing out the divine-human resonances, indicating that ancient readers were also aware of the divine-human motif in these chapters. For example, when Jacob sees the angels, *Tg. Neof.* adds, “Perhaps they are messengers from Laban, my mother’s brother, who has returned to pursue after me; or the hosts of Esau, my brother, who comes to meet me, or hosts of angels from before the Lord come to deliver me from the hands of both of them.” English translation from Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*, ArBib 1A (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992). For a similar idea, see *Tg. Ps.-J.*

[7] J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 198.

[8] See C. Houtman, “Jacob at Mahanaim: Some Remarks on Genesis xxxii 2–3,” *VT* 28 (1978): 37–44; cf. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 505.

[9] See Walton, *Thou Traveller Unknown*, 182.

own (מלאכים) to his brother Esau (Gen 32:4–6).[10] Thus, it is worth bearing in mind the semantic range of the term מלאך, as its use in 32:2 may point back to the angelic beings at Bethel in Genesis 28, as well as hint at the messengers that Jacob deploys to meet his brother, again offering the reader a point of connection between the human and divine in this narrative.

Moving on to 32:2b, the text notes that Jacob's response to this divine encounter is to name the place Mahanaim (מחנים), "two camps," stating that, "this is the camp of God (מחנה אלהים)." The reason for the dual usage of מחנים is not immediately clear, though it most probably refers to the divine "camp" as well as that of Jacob's family and possessions. Interestingly, the notion of camps will also appear throughout the two chapters in a number of contexts that again are suggestive of an association between the human and divine.[11] While in 32:2 the term is used in relation to Jacob's encounter with the messengers of God, the reader also notes the same term appearing when Jacob fearfully and strategically divides his camp in 32:8–9, as well as in Esau's question to Jacob in 33:8 about the gifts which were sent to him on the way to the reunion ("what do you mean by all this camp" [כל־המחנה הזה]). Finally, the section concerning Jacob's preparations comes to a close in 32:22 with the statement that while Jacob's gift (מנחה) went on ahead of him, he himself stayed the night in the camp (מחנה). As Gunkel and others have highlighted, there seems to be a word play here on "gift"

[10] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 505.

[11] See Römer, "Genèse 32,2–22," 183; Blum, *Die Komposition*, 142.

and "camp," and the two encounters—with God and Esau—of which these terms remind the reader.[12]

Returning to Jacob's preparations, the messengers deliver Jacob's message to his estranged brother, giving a brief account of his life since their separation, a catalogue of his belongings, and the purpose of his approach: "that I might find favour (למצא־חן) in your eyes" (32:6). Here we encounter another term—חן—which plays an important role as the account unfolds in these chapters.[13] After the brothers have reunited and Esau enquires about all the gifts (מנחה) which were sent to him, Jacob reiterates that these were meant "To find favour (חן) in the eyes of my lord" (33:5). The brothers go back and forth as to whether or not Esau should keep the gift, at which point Jacob responds,

> No, please, if I have now found favour (חן) in your eyes, then accept my gift (מנחתי) from my hand. For I have seen your face as one sees the face of God because you have accepted me favourably (ותרצני). Take, please, my blessing (את־ברכתי) which was brought to you, because God has been gracious to me (חנני), and because I have all I need (33:10–11).

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[12] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 344.

[13] On the term חן see David N. Freedman and Jack Lundbom, "חנן," *TDOT* (1997): 5:24–29; Terence E. Fretheim, "חנן," *NIDOTTE* (1996): 2:203–206. This term carries the idea of "acceptance," and in the realm of human relationships, seeking such favour often includes the elements of giving gifts, deferential language, and prostration. See Gen 34:11; Gen 42:21; 2Sam 14:22; Ruth 2:10; Ps 31:10; Esth 4:8.

Two issues are worth noting in this encounter. To begin with, these verses include the (in)famous use of ברכה. Jacob throughout the narrative has been referring to his gift for Esau with the expected noun מנחה, but he abruptly switches his terminology in 33:11 and refers to the gift as את־ברכתי, employing the word normally used for "blessing." It has been noted that ברכה can be used in a secular sense as a gift or greeting.[14] However, this choice of terminology is conspicuous, particularly in light of the blessing scene of Genesis 27 and its ramifications.[15] Whatever the authorial or redactional intent, Jacob's use of this term again brings to the fore the complex way in which his relationships (and struggles) with God and humanity (in this case Isaac and Esau) are interwoven. Further, we also see in this exchange a shift in how "favour" and "gift" are used, again drawing out the divine-human connection: with Esau's acceptance already gained, "The gift is now offered by Jacob, not to obtain favor, but in gratitude for God's favor … made visible in the face of Esau."[16]

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[14] See, for example, *Rashi's Commentary: Genesis*, 162.

[15] Fishbane calls this "an unconscious double-entendre" (*Biblical Text*, 52). Others understand this as a symbolic restitution for past wrongs; see Sarna, *Genesis*, 230; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 186; Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 67. Further interpretations discussed in Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance*, 119–120.

[16] Fretheim, "חנן," 204. Along with the explicit associations made in Jacob's speech, ancient and contemporary readers have also suggested possible cultic overtones in the language used here, which might point to further intersections of the human and the divine in Genesis 32–

In summary, there are a number of recurring terms and phrases—messengers, camps, gift, and favour—that both explicitly and implicitly associate the human and divine in these chapters.

4. The Encounter at the Jabbok

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33. Rashi, for example, notes that Jacob's language, especially the use of רצה, evokes the idea of propitiation. See *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi's Commentary: Genesis*, ed. Rosenbaum, M. and A.M. Silbermann (London: Shapiro, Vallentine & Co., 1929), 162; see also Terence E. Fretheim, "רצה," *NIDOTTE* (1996): 3:1185–1186. Weinfeld, meanwhile, highlights Jacob's usage of מנחה ("gift") in the conversation: "This *minḥâ* and Esau's acceptance of it function representatively by signaling "favor" (*ḥēn*) and "favorable acceptance" (*rāṣâ*) between the two hostile brothers. J pointedly draws out the meaning of this *minḥâ* for the sphere of human relationships by using it like a sacrificial term. … Even in the case of the profane *minḥâ* the term's cultic-sacral connotation can adroitly be brought into play; this presupposes that the *minḥâ* offering was accorded an extremely wide sphere of efficacy in mollifying the deity … and similarly presupposed such efficacy being operative in the secular sphere" (M. Weinfeld and H.-J. Fabry, "מנחה," *TDOT* [1992]: 8:416).

We arrive at one of the most well-known scenes from the Hebrew Bible.[17] After sending his family and possessions ahead of him (32:23–24), Jacob is left alone on one side of the Jabbok.[18] In 32:25 we read, "And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the dawn." The stranger cannot overpower Jacob; when the man asks to be released because it is daybreak, Jacob insists he will not let go without a blessing. The man eventually blesses him, changing Jacob's name to "Israel," stating that he has striven with both God and humanity and has prevailed (32:28). The man refuses to give his name, but Jacob later names the site "Peniel," stating that he saw God face to face and lived (32:31).

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[17] Ancient Jewish comments on this scene can be found in William T. Miller, *Mysterious Encounters at Mamre and Jabbok* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 97–111. Early Christian interpretations in Miller, *Mysterious Encounters*, 119–138, and Mark Sheridan, ed., *Genesis 12–50*, ACCS Old Testament 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 218–224. Further elements of reception as well as contemporary literature on this passage are discussed in Hermann Spieckermann, *Der gotteskampf: Jakob und der Engel in der Bibel und Kunst* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1997), and Esther J. Hamori, *"When Gods Were Men": The Embodied God in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature,* BZAW 384 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 13–25 and 96–103; see also John L. McKenzie, "Jacob at Peniel: Gen. 32:24–32," *CBQ* 25 (1963):71–76; Stephen A. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: the Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *JANES* 14 (1982): 37–60; Erhard Blum, "Die Komplexität der Überlieferung. Zur diachronen und synchronen Auslegung von Gen 32,23–33," in *Textgestalt und Komposition: Exegetische Beiträge zu Tora und Vordere Propheten*, ed. Wolfgang Oswald, FAT 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 43–84; Hutton, "Jacob's 'Two Camps,'" 20–32.

[18] On the complexities in the geographical locations in these chapters, consult Hutton, "Jacob's 'Two Camps,'" 20–32.

Three issues are worth noting in this encounter with regard to the topic at hand: the identity of the stranger who assails Jacob, Esau-related linguistic resonances, and the renaming of Jacob as Israel.

The text states quite ambiguously in 32:25 that “a man (איש)” wrestled with Jacob. An early interpretation, common in the rabbinic tradition, was that the assailant was Esau’s guardian angel.[19] The fact that this episode might in some way be connected with Esau is understandable, given the broader context. In this case Jacob’s naming of Peniel would be in reference to a ‘god’ or divine being (32:21), as would his response to Esau in 33:10: “To see your face is like seeing the face of a divine being (that is, your angel).” Another interpretation suggests that, in religio-historical terms, the attacker can be understood as a river-spirit that does not want Jacob crossing the river. Gunkel and Westermann both note that ancient sagas frequently connect geographical locations and associated spirits, many of whom act only at night.[20]

A third approach to understanding Jacob’s struggle is that the patriarch is here fighting his inner demons. It is his past and the guilt resulting from his actions with which he is now wrestling, B. Jacob points out.[21] Likewise, Spina suggests that this stranger might be

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[19] See *Gen. Rab.* 72:3 and *Rashi’s Commentary: Genesis*, 159. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 404. This may trace back to the text of Hos 12:4–5, which references this episode and mentions both an angel and God.

[20] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 519, 521; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 350–353.

[21] Jacob, *Das Erste Buch Der Tora*, 643.

understood as an "everyman," representative of the various people with whom Jacob has struggled through the years: Isaac, Laban, and Esau.[22] Indeed, the shift in language—from unnamed man to אלהים—might indicate that the struggle with humanity becomes a struggle with God by the end of the episode.[23] A final understanding is that this is Jacob's God, or a related angel, with whom Jacob struggles. The reference in Hos 12:4–5 to both is suggestive: "In his maturity he contended with God (את־אלהים), he struggled with the angel (מלאך) and prevailed."[24] This interpretive approach creates difficulties, most notably relating to issues of theophany and anthropomorphism.[25] Nevertheless, Jacob's explanation for his naming the place Peniel ("I have seen God face to face") has meant that, in its final form, this has been the dominant understanding drawn from the text.[26] While these complexities and ambiguities

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[22] Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 24.

[23] Spina, *Faith*, 24.

[24] On issues relating to Genesis 32–33 and Hosea 12, see Spieckermann, *Der gotteskampf*; Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 610; Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, Hermeneia, trans. Gary Stansell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 205–213; W.L. Holladay, "Chiasmus, the Key to Hosea XII 3–6," *VT* 16 (1966): 53–64; Steven L. McKenzie, "The Jacob Tradition in Hosea XII 4–5," *VT* 36 (1986): 311–322.

[25] How best to render the term ויגע in 32:25 is difficult, with interpreters disagreeing as to whether the term is a violent "strike" or a soft "touch." See the discussion in Hamori, *"When Gods,"* 97.

[26] Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Orton (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 600.

remain, the reception of this episode is a reminder that readers have long struggled with how best to identify this opponent, with both divine and human interpretations abounding.

Second, there are two further linguistic resonances in this scene that are suggestive of the association of the divine and Esau. One might first note that in 32:25 we are informed that the man "wrestled" (יאבק) with Jacob until daybreak. The use of this term for "wrestle" is unique to this story (32:25, 29) and thus may be used here for literary purposes, as Jacob (יעקב) is wrestling (יאבק) at the Jabbok (יבק).[27] Meanwhile, when the time comes for the separated brothers to meet, we read in 33:4 that Esau "embraces" (ויחבקהו) Jacob. There is a strong phonetic similarity between the term used for the fraternal embrace (חבק) and that used to describe Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok (אבק). Second, Jacob's rationale for naming the site Peniel ("For I have seen God face to face, and my life was spared [ותנצל נפשי]," 32:31) is reminiscent of his prayer in 32:12, where he requests that God "deliver" him (הצילני) from his brother in their impending encounter.[28] Indeed, both of these resonances offer an inversion of expectations: while Jacob is no doubt expecting another encounter similar to the previous evening's struggle (אבק), he instead receives an unexpected embrace (חבק). And while it is

[27] For more on the various wordplays at work in this encounter, see Stanley Gevirtz, "Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford," *HUCA* 46 (1975): 33–54; Blum, "The Jacob Traditions," 187–190; Sarna, *Genesis*, 227.

[28] Herbert Marks, "Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology," *JBL* 114 (1995): 21–42 (41–42).

from his brother's hand that he expects he will need to be delivered (הצילני), it is in the Jabbok encounter where his life is in fact spared (ותנצל נפשי).

A final issue of note in this episode relates to the changing of Jacob's name as part of his blessing. The meaning of the name Israel has long been the subject of debate and speculation.[29] The narrative explanation ("you have striven [שרית] with God and men (עם־אלהים ועם־אנשים)," 32:29) suggests the name is related to the stem שרה, "to strive."[30] There are alternative understandings of the name and its origins that need not detain us here;[31] the salient issue is that the narrative explanation frames the renaming as indicative of Jacob's character as one whose struggles encompass both human and divine.[32]

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[29] On various elements on the name "Israel" as well as the context of the renaming, see Robert Coote, "The Meaning of the Name Israel," *HTR* 65 (1972): 137–146; Marks, "Biblical Naming," 21–42; Sarna, *Genesis*, 404–405 (Excursus 25). For an extended treatment on the reception of this name, see C.T.R. Hayward, *Interpretations of the Name Israel in Ancient Judaism and Some Early Christian Writings: From Victorious Athlete to Heavenly Champion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[30] This same understanding seems to be at work in Hos 12:4 ("He strove [שרה] with the angel and prevailed"). The divine in such compound names, however, is usually the subject of the action, which would suggest a meaning of "God strives" or "God contends."

[31] See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 518, and the literature noted above.

[32] It is possible that עם־אלהים ועם־אנשים is an idiomatic expression denoting totality (Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 518; Sarna, *Genesis*, 405). This does not, in my opinion,

In sum, there are a number of issues in Gen 32:23–33 which further the association of the human and divine in these chapters: the ambiguity regarding Jacob's opponent, linguistic resonances and narrative inversions that bring Esau to mind, and the narrative explanation concerning the renaming of Jacob as Israel.

5. The "face" motif

The language of the Peniel encounter points us to one final issue: the use of פנה / פנים in these chapters.[33] Variations on these terms are found fifteen times in 32:1–33:14, initially as Jacob sends messengers and gifts ahead of himself on the way to Esau (לפניו, 32:4, 17). The usage crescendos in 32:21, where Jacob makes clear his intentions with reference to Esau, noting that, "'I will cover his face (אכפרה פניו) with these gifts I am sending ahead of me (לפני). After this, I will see his face (אראה פניו), and perhaps he will lift up my face (ישא פני).'" To "see the face" can refer to a general meeting with someone, to having access to an elevated individual, or to denote a cultic encounter with a deity.[34] Jacob's desire,

detract from the way in which these terms function as part of the larger series of associations present in the narrative of Genesis 32–33.

[33] Full discussion on this term can be found in H. Simian-Yofre, "פנים," *TDOT* (2006): 11:589–615; cf. BDB 815–816. This motif has been noted elsewhere; see Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 206; Blum, *Die Komposition*, 143; and Marks, "Biblical Naming," 39–41.

[34] Simian-Yofre, "פנים," 11:604. See Exod 34:35; Dan 1:10; Gen 46:30; 48:11; Gen 44:23, 26; 2Sam 3:13.

meanwhile, is to אכפרה פניו, "cover/wipe the face" of Esau, a phrase which is usually translated as "appease" or "pacify," and is a suggestive employment of the term most often associated with the idea of atonement in the HB (כפר).[35] Finally, to "lift the face" is a figurative expression denoting forgiveness or acceptance.[36] Taken as a whole, in 32:21 "face" terminology is used in several ways: we have Jacob sending gifts ahead (לפני) in the hope of appeasing (with cultic overtones?) his brother (אכפרה פניו), so that when he meets him (אראה פניו), his brother will forgive him (ישא פני).

We find this motif being picked up again in dramatic fashion in relation to the nocturnal struggle at the Jabbok, discussed above: Jacob names the place of struggle Peniel (פניאל), noting that he has seen God "face to face" and lived (פנים אל־פנים; 32:31).[37] Finally, in 33:10 the use of this *leitwort* comes to a head as Jacob says to his brother, "I have seen your face (פניך) as one sees the face of God (פני אלהים) because you have accepted me favourably."

[35] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 510; Richard A. Averbeck, "כפר", *NIDOTTE* (1997): 2:698.

[36] Simian-Yofre, "פנים," 11:600. See examples in Num 6:26; Gen 19:21; 1Sam 25:35; Lev 19:15.

[37] There is some textual uncertainty regarding "Peniel" here. While *BHS* uses the traditional Hebrew פניאל in 32:31, a variant פנואל occurs in 32:32. The Vulg., SamP, and Syr. versions all use the latter in v. 31 as well, and this form is also used elsewhere, in Judg 8:8 and 1Kgs 12:25. For some reasons as to why פניאל may be used in 32:31, see Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 519, and Hamori, *"When Gods",* 23.

Jacob's comparison of the face of God and the face of Esau has provoked much commentary down through the centuries. One interpretive option is to see this as further evidence of Jacob as a trickster. Gunkel, for example, suggests this is simply flattery, while Petersen argues that Jacob's statement here is a "psychologically compelling speech" meant to persuade Esau.[38] Another interpretation draws out the comparison of 33:10 and 32:31 in a way that takes Jacob at his word. As Fokkelman notes, "The meeting with Esau lies in a single perspective with the meeting with God."[39] These varying interpretive perspectives point to significant differences in how the dynamics at work in this scene—including the motivations of the brothers—can be understood. Nevertheless, however one resolves these issues interpretively, the prominence of the face motif is striking at a literary level, as Jacob's comparison of the face of God and that of Esau brings this motif to a decisive climax.[40]

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[38] Gunkel, *Genesis*, 344, 355; David L. Petersen, "Genesis and Family Values," *JBL* 124 (2005): 5–24 (20).

[39] Fokkelman, *Narrative Art,* 226. If, as Alter suggests, the "you accepted me graciously" (ותרצני) of 33:10 stands in parallel with the "my life was spared" (ותנצל נפשי) in 32:21, then the reader's attention is again drawn to the convergence of the human and divine in these two encounters. See Alter, *Genesis*, 186.

[40] Of course, in rabbinic tradition, another approach was to avoid altogether the problem of anthropomorphism in the Hebrew text. Thus, *Tg. Onq.* has Jacob saying that "seeing your face is as the sight of the face of the great ones," and *Tg. Ps.-J.* has "the face of your angel," the latter seeming to be a specific allusion to rabbinic ideas concerning Jacob's opponent. See Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis: Translated with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes,* ArBib 6 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 118; and Michael Maher,

Thus, in a number of ways, the face motif progressively highlights the intersection of the human and divine in these chapters, most notably in 32:21, 32:31, and culminating in Jacob's comparison offered in 33:10.

6. Conclusion

A close reading of Genesis 32–33 suggests that the intersection of the human and the divine is a key motif in the scene leading up to and including Jacob's reunion with Esau.[41] Some of

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Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis: Translated, with Introduction and Notes, ArBib 1b (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 116.

[41] While this study has focused on synchronic issues, there are further diachronic questions that emerge if the above, on the whole, is accurate. For example, as noted at the outset, source-critical questions and concomitant concerns regarding origins have long been issues of debate with regard to these chapters. Traditional documentary research has divided the material in these chapters between J and E, and recent reconstructions have posited that J material consists of 32:4–9, (and possibly 10–13), 14a, 23 and most of 33:1–16, while E is responsible for 32:1–3, 14b–22, 24–33, and 33:17–20 (and possibly 33:5, 10–11). See Tzemah Yoreh, "Jacob's Struggle," *ZAW* 117 (2005): 95–97; Hutton, "Jacob's 'Two Camps,'" 20–32. There are, to be sure, disparate traditions which have been brought together in these chapters; the etiological elements alone suggest diverse origins. However, the various allusions noted above indicate that, whatever pre-history lies behind the text as we have it, the received form shows signs of intentional narrative and linguistic integration. Blum notes that "the dense network of allusions and word-plays" found in these chapters make it difficult to reconstruct earlier traditions in this account, which shows "in its narrative substance both: an impressive complexity and literary unity" (Blum, "The Jacob Tradition," 206, 207; cf.

the issues highlighted above include the structural resonance of the Laban-Jabbok-Esau encounters; the dual usage of “angels/messengers” and “camps”; the language of gift and pacification used by Jacob; Jacob’s use of “favour” to refer both to God’s provision and Esau’s acceptance; the ambiguity regarding Jacob’s opponent at the Jabbok; the narrative inversion of expectations concerning God and Esau; the narrative explanation given by the opponent in renaming Jacob; and the strong presence of the “face” motif, culminating in Jacob’s explicit comparison of seeing the face of Esau and seeing the face of God.

Thus, in this climactic scene of the Jacob-Esau narratives, emphasis is placed on the dual character of Jacob’s dealings: both God and humanity are bound up in Jacob’s journey. The various word plays and allusions that permeate this account suggest that this idea has become embedded in the story itself—the structure, language, and broader narrative elements of Genesis 32–33 highlight the intersection of the human and the divine in this scene, corroborating the explanation given by the stranger when changing Jacob’s name to Israel: he is indeed one who strives with both God and humanity.

David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 258–259, 270). The fact that various uses of “camp” (32:2, 8, 9, 33:8), “angels/messengers” (32:2, 4, 6), and the “face” motif (32:4, 17, 21, 32, 33:10) cut across various proposed source divisions would seem to corroborate Blum’s contention, while also pointing toward the need for further investigation on these elements of the text and its history.