

## Comments on Genesis 32

The description of events in this chapter result in unwarranted and unnecessary exegesis (for a good summary, see [Geller](#)). The simple reading, or peshat, is easily grasped when comparing the text of this chapter to that of the surrounding chapters. The reason for the questionable exegesis is a long running inconsistency in translation, a penchant for reading this chapter outside the context of the surrounding text, and the desire to read in mysterious, enigmatic symbolism.

This chapter is to be understood in the context of Jacob's original dream from 28:10-22, as Jacob explicitly quotes the promises made there (cf. 28:13-15) in v. 12. In ch. 28, Jacob is fleeing his brother, who wants to kill him because he has bought the birthright (cf. 25:27-34) and stolen the blessing (27:1-29), leaving Esau with literally nothing of his father's estate. As Jacob flees for his life, he covenants with the Lord, who explains the terms and importance of the covenant he has inherited from his father and grandfather. Twenty years later, in ch. 32, Jacob, now very wealthy, is on his way back home, but he doesn't know if Esau still wants to kill him.

The Lord has told him to return to his ancestral home (cf. 31:3), but He has said nothing about Esau, one way or the other. When Jacob separates from Laban, he is stopped by a group of angels, or God's messengers. The Hebrew identifies them in v. 1 as "malak", the same term used in v. 3, but translated in most versions to "messenger" instead of "angel". But, both are the same word in Hebrew. We have seen these angel-messengers before in Hagar's first flight from Sarah in 16:7-11, in the Sodom and Gomorrah story in 19:1-15, in Hagar's second flight in 21:17, in the binding of Isaac in 22:11-15. In all of these cases, these angel-messengers appear to be normal humans, but have some kind of divine authority or commission. There is nothing in the text necessarily requiring them to be non-human, though at times it is implied. The result is translators of the Bible render the Hebrew "malak" based upon the individual passage. Hence we have "angel" in v. 1 and "messenger" in v. 3, which suggest it is two different sets of people instead of the same (note in v. 16 the servants referenced are identified using the Hebrew word "ebed", not "malak"). In this particular case, we should read both as the same word, either one way or the other, not differently.

This group of angel-messengers forms a second camp, hence the statement and name in v. 2. There are two camps, one camp of angel-messengers and one camp of Jacob's family. They meet, and Jacob attempts to have the angel-messengers deal with Esau.

Jacob sends angel-messengers to go to Esau and tell him Jacob is returning home with his own flocks and herds and servants, and that Jacob is deferring to Esau by calling him "lord" and himself "Esau's servant" (v. 3-5).

What Jacob is trying to do is to convince Esau he no longer has any interest in his father's estate, because he has his own wealth, which he is bringing back. His explicit deference to Esau is meant to communicate his respect to him, but this doesn't diffuse the situation at all. In fact, when Esau hears Jacob is coming back home, he musters a force of four hundred men (v. 6) to attack Jacob, as reported by the angel-messengers. Jacob was hoping his gesture to Esau would help, and if not, then maybe the angel-messengers would conveniently deal with Esau themselves.

However, the angels do not deal with his Esau problem, because Jacob himself is the source of this problem, because of his deception, so the angel-messengers, and the Lord, expect him to resolve them himself. Jacob separates his family into two groups, hoping some might survive the attack, as Esau doesn't know how large Jacob's family is, so if he slaughters one group, and assumes that is it, then the others can escape (v. 7-8).

Jacob then prays to the Lord pleading with Him to protect him from Esau, because if he and his family are dead, then how can the Lord fulfil the promises made in ch. 18 (v. 9-12)? The Lord doesn't immediately respond though, and neither do the angel-messengers.

After praying, Jacob comes up with the idea of sending droves of gifts to Esau as he approaches to show he is no longer interested in such things, by giving earthly gifts and deferring power to Esau, where he previously stole them (v. 13-21).

The wrestle with the angel is Jacob grabbing one of the angel-messengers, presumably the leader, and refusing to release him until he blesses him per the requested blessing in v. 9-12. The angel relents and does bless him, but only after Jacob has set the plan in place to ingratiate himself with Esau in v. 13-22. As Jacob has repented of his materialism, the angel blesses him (v. 24-30).

The angel's reference to the morning coming is about resolving the conflict between Jacob and the angel before Esau shows up, as Esau is on the way and arrives early that morning (cf. 33:1), the angel is warning Jacob of Esau's imminent arrival with 400 men, so they need to stop messing around, and Jacob needs to put his plan of droves of gifts into action. This isn't some mysterious enigmatic reference, as the text makes it clear Esau arrives early that very morning (cf. 33:1).

The strike on the hip (v. 25) is meant to show Jacob the

angel-messenger has power over physical things and can harm him, but is not there to do that kind of thing, which is what Jacob wanted him to do against Esau in v. 3. The angel-messenger could have done worse to Jacob, or to Esau. But, the angel-messenger's purpose is for heavenly things, not earthly things.

The droves of flocks and herds do soften Esau's heart, so Jacob has resolved his problem with Esau by repenting of his former bad behavior and making amends from twenty years earlier. He wanted the angel-messengers to deal with his Esau problem, and they said, "No, you resolve your Esau problem, because you created them, and you need to resolve them yourself." The angel-messengers came there for heavenly things, not earthly things.

Now, whether the angel-messengers were divinely authorized mortal humans or non-mortal heavenly angels, it seems likely it was the former over the latter, given the literal wrestling and inuring of Jacob's hip. But, to the theological point of the story, it doesn't matter. The theological point is the Lord's covenant with Jacob in ch. 28 doesn't give him carte blanche to behave badly and then expect the Lord deal with all of his problems for him. We see Abraham chastened for his bad behavior in ch. 22, and here Jacob is being chastened for his past bad behavior with Esau. The covenant with Israel does not give Israel a pass when it comes to personal ethics and morality, and it does not mean the Lord will step in and protect them from every mortal threat, especially when it is their own fault. If they have moral or ethical lapses, the Lord will not clean up after them or provide a convenient fix or protect them from mortal threats.

**<sup>1</sup>And Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. <sup>2</sup>And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim.**

v1-2 After parting company with Laban at the end of the previous chapter, Jacob and his family keep traveling and they meet and are stopped by a group of angel-messengers (v. 1). Jacob recognizes the angel-messengers and gives the place a name that reflects it (v. 2).

v1 "angels of God met him", Alter translates this "the messengers of God accosted him" and Speiser notes "Hebrew *pg'* construed with *b<sup>e</sup>*- conveys the idea of physical contact. On this basis, the present incident has an inner connection with the encounter at Peniel". This makes it clear the angel-messengers

are not a vision or an entirely non-physical spiritual entity or immaterial manifestation. These angel-messengers come into physical contact with Jacob, the same as did the angel-messengers in ch. 18.

v2 "Mahanaim", meaning "two camps" or "two companies", again reinforcing the literal presence of the angel-messengers.

<sup>3</sup> And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom. <sup>4</sup> And he commanded them, saying, Thus shall ye speak unto my lord Esau; Thy servant Jacob saith thus, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed there until now: <sup>5</sup> And I have oxen, and asses, flocks, and menservants, and womenservants: and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find grace in thy sight. <sup>6</sup> And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, We came to thy brother Esau, and also he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him.

<sup>7</sup> Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed: and he divided the people that was with him, and the flocks, and herds, and the camels, into two bands; <sup>8</sup> And said, If Esau come to the one company, and smite it, then the other company which is left shall escape.

<sup>9</sup> And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country, and to thy kindred, and I will deal well with thee: <sup>10</sup> I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. <sup>11</sup> Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him, lest he will come and smite me, and the mother with the children. <sup>12</sup> And thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.

v3-12 Jacob has the angel-messengers go and talk to his brother Esau at his home (v. 3) and he tells them what to say (v. 4) hoping the message will assuage Esau's anger by convincing him Jacob no longer has any interest in their father's estate (v. 5). The angel-messengers do so, but return with the bad news that Esau is preparing to meet Jacob with four hundred men (v. 6).

Jacob panics and divides his group into two camps and separates them (v. 7), so if one group is slaughtered the other might survive (v. 8).

Jacob then prays to the Lord invoking the promises previously made to himself and his father and grandfather (v. 9-10), asking for deliverance (v. 11), because He Himself said his children would be many (v. 12, cp. 28:14).

Note neither the Lord nor the angel-messengers respond to Jacob's impassioned plea.

v3 "messengers", not servants as in v. 16. Jacob is sending angel-messengers from God's host to meet with Esau, hoping they will resolve his problem with Esau. The rabbi's commenting in Genesis Rabbah read this as "angels" as well, see Neusner, Genesis Rabbah, volume 3, pages 95-96.

"Esau...Seir...Edom", meaning red, red, red. The implication is blood, cf. 25:30. Jacob fears Esau, a man of blood, will kill him and his entire family. The usage of these terms is intended to conjure the imagery of the preceding texts of ch. 25 and 27, bringing that context forward.

v4 "and he commanded them", Alter renders this "and he charged them". Jacob is telling the angel-messengers what to do. This is why modern translators are unwilling to translate this appearance of "malak" to "angel" instead of "messenger". The assumption is if Jacob is commanding them to do something, then they must be servants and not divine beings. But, then why would the Hebrew used be "malak" and not "ebed" as in v. 16, which clearly denotes the people are Jacob's employees and not angel-messengers. These are not servants, they are angel-messengers whom Jacob has tasked with resolving his problems, which they decline.

v5 Jacob is telling Esau he has his own flocks and herds and servants that he is bring back with him from his twenty years at Laban's house, so he is no longer interested in inheriting or taking over Isaac's estate, as he has his own estate. So, any former claim he had on Isaac's estate is no longer desired. When Jacob fled in haste twenty years earlier it was because he had purloined his father's estate from Esau, the rightful heir of both the birthright and the blessing. Now that he is returning, Jacob is letting Esau know he no longer wants those things. But, Esau doesn't care, he still wants to kill Jacob, as he did twenty years earlier.

v7-8 Jacob's initial plan to divide the family into two groups changes after Jacob prays (v. 9-12) and the angel-messenger blesses him (v. 29). He instead employs the tactic of successive droves of flocks (cf. v. 13-21) and then a succession of separated family units (cf. 33:1-3).

<sup>13</sup> And he lodged there that same night; and took of that which came to his hand a present for Esau his brother; <sup>14</sup> Two hundred she goats, and twenty he goats, two hundred ewes, and twenty rams, <sup>15</sup> Thirty milch camels with their colts, forty kine, and ten bulls, twenty she asses, and ten foals. <sup>16</sup> And he delivered them into the hand of his servants, every drove by themselves; and said unto his servants, Pass over before me, and put a space betwixt drove and drove. <sup>17</sup> And he commanded the foremost, saying, when Esau my brother meeteth thee, and asketh thee, saying, whose art thou? and whither goest thou? and whose are these before thee? <sup>18</sup> Then thou shalt say, They be thy servant Jacob's; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau: and, behold, also he is behind us. <sup>19</sup> And so commanded he the second, and the third, and all that followed the droves, saying, On this manner shall ye speak unto Esau, when ye find him. <sup>20</sup> And say ye moreover, Behold, thy servant Jacob is behind us. For he said, I will appease him with the present that goeth before me, and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept of me. <sup>21</sup> So went the present over before him: and himself lodged that night in the company.

v13-21 After praying, and not receiving a response, Jacob takes the initiative and comes up with a plan to pacify Esau's anger. He will send series of droves of herds as gifts to Esau with each set of servants presenting a message of deferral from Jacob to Esau, in the hopes that when Esau finally reaches Jacob the anger will be dissipated.

v20 Alter translates this verse:

Let me placate him with the tribute that goes before me, and after I shall look on his face, perhaps he will show me a kindly face.

and states:

The Hebrew actually has "face" four times in this brief speech. "Placate" is literally "cover over his face" (presumably, angry face); and "before me" can be broken down as "to my face." To "look on his face" is a locution generally used for entering into the presence of royalty; and "show me a kind face," an idiom that denotes forgiveness, is literally "lift up my face" (presumably, my "fallen" or dejected face).

<sup>22</sup> And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two womenservants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had.

v22-23 Jacob again separates the family from the servants and livestock and then from himself, hoping to spare their lives. Jacob's calculation is perhaps Esau will spare everyone else and only murder him. If so, then his wives and children survive him and the Lord's promise is kept. Jacob is hoping that if all of the droves of herds do not soften Esau's heart, then he will keep passing them by, including the women and children, and then go on at last to Jacob and murder him, leaving everyone else alive.

<sup>24</sup> And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. <sup>25</sup> And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. <sup>27</sup> And he said unto him, what is thy name? And he said, Jacob. <sup>28</sup> And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. <sup>29</sup> And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. <sup>30</sup> And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.

<sup>31</sup> And as he passed over Penuel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh. <sup>32</sup> Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank.

v24-32 Jacob has sent his all others and his family away (v. 22-23) and is therefore left alone out of his camp, but there are still angel-messengers present. He wrestles with one of the angel-messengers (v. 24), and when the angel-messenger cannot beat him, he injures Jacob (v. 25) and insists he release him because the sun is rising, as Esau is soon arriving (cf. 33:1), but Jacob refuses unless the angel-messenger blesses him (v. 26). The angel-messenger asks his name (v. 27) and then changes it to Israel (v. 28). Jacob asks the angel-messenger's name, and is rebuffed, because the angel-messenger is on the Lord's business not his own business, so his own name is irrelevant, but he blessed Jacob then and there (v. 29). Jacob recognizes the angel-messenger's blessing represents the Lord's good favor, and therefore his life will be somehow preserved (v. 30). Jacob's wrestle leaves him permanently injured, but overall results in the preservation of his life therefore Israel's existence, something they need to remember in perpetuity (v. 31-

32), as they owe their existence to him.

Note Jacob does not alter his earlier plan from v. 13-21 as a result of the blessing in v. 29. Jacob recognizes he has a role to play in the reconciliation with Esau, and it is not the Lord dealing with all his problems for him.

v24 "wrestled a man", Hosea 12:4 indicates the man was an angel.

v25 That the angel-messenger could injure Jacob show he could have injured Esau as well, but chose not to. And, the ability to injure necessarily requires the ability to do either more or less harm, including use lethal force. The angel-messenger could have harmed or killed Esau, and perhaps even his entire force of four hundred men, rendering the threat to Jacob entirely moot. But, he did not. Theologically, this is the point of the detail here. The angel-mesengers could have resolved all of Jacob's problems themselves, but didn't, because this wasn't the Lord's mess, it was Jacob's mess, and they expected him to deal with it.

v25 Regarding the touching of the hip socket, Alter states:

The inclination of modern translations to render the verb here as "struck" is unwarranted, being influenced either by the context of by the cognate noun *nega'*, which means "plague" or "affliction." But the verb *naga* in the *gal* conjugation always means "to touch," even "to barely touch," and only in the *pi'el* conjugation can it mean "to afflict." The adversary maims Jacob with a magic touch, or, if one prefers, by skillful pressure on a pressure point.

The Hebrew implies the angel-messenger was capable of much greater harm than what was inflicted, and also makes it unequivocal that the conflict was literally physical and not a psychological struggle or spiritual vision.

v26 "Let me go, for the day breaketh", various commentators use this to go great length to ascribe mystical or mythical folklore to this statement, as though Jacob's wrestling opponent was something other than a physical presence. However, reading in context, it is clear Esau's arrival is imminent (cf. 33:1) and the angel-messenger is concerned about Jacob being ready to face Esau.

v28-29 The name change denotes a change in Jacob's character.

His name was originally insulting, the heel, but the struggles of his life have changed him into someone who wrestles with the Lord's angel-messengers and wins out, despite the difficulties.

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