

Jacob Wrestles with God and Is Named “Israel” — the Spiritual Founding Event for the Nation of Israel.

“This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break”

—Genesis 32:24

The actual socio-cultural establishment of the nation as an entity would require four “L’s”—A LORD, a Language, a Law, and a Land. The patriarchs had the LORD. While they were in Egypt for four hundred years, the Hebrew language was being forged. God then gave them the Torah (Law) by the hand of Moses at Mt. Sinai, and they were on their way to the Promised Land.

But this event in the life of the man for whom the nation is named—Jacob/Israel—is the first time the name “Israel” is formed and applies to anyone. The spiritual transformation in this father of the nation, and the meaning of the name, and the promises to be fulfilled comprises the spiritual founding event of the nation.

Jacob has spent twenty years working for his uncle Laban. In the process he has taken two wives, Leah and Rachel, and has acquired many children, flocks and herds. Then, in providential timing, he must return home. God tells him to return. Jacob has been feeling guilty all this time for wronging his brother and he is afraid of his brother’s revenge as he returns home.

Let’s follow Jacob’s journey home. We resume our you-are-there, second person story mode. The quotes in the story are from Genesis 32. It must have been a dark night, and truly a “dark night of the soul” for Jacob, before this “man” appeared and the outcome of the wrestling match brought new light.



The Story

This journey is so important for God’s plan that God sends angels to meet him on the way. Jacob is traveling with his family and flock and herds, and he is worrying about the anger of his brother Esau. So he decides to send messengers before him to make peace with Esau. He tells the messengers to tell Esau, *“Say this—to my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I have stayed with Laban until now and have gotten wives and many servants, oxen, donkeys, sheep and I send ahead to tell my lord, to find favor in your eyes.”* The messengers go and return with the news that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob with an army of 400 men! Jacob is terrified at the news. So he decides to divide his company into two camps, thinking that if Esau attacks one camp, the other will escape.

Then we see Jacob pray fervently to God, reminding God of His promises to his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, *“Oh LORD, you told me to return to my birthplace and to my relatives, and you promised to treat me kindly. I am not worthy of all your unfailing love you have shown me. When I left home I had but a walking stick, and now my household fills two camps! O, LORD, please rescue me from my brother Esau. I am afraid he is coming to kill me and take my wives and children. But you promised to give me grace and multiply my descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore. So, help me O LORD!”*

Jacob stays there and sets up camp for the night. He prepares a gift for Esau of many of his sheep, donkeys, cows and camels. He instructs his servants to lead the gift of animals on ahead to meet Esau, and when they meet Esau his servants are to say, *“These belong to your servant Jacob, a gift sent to my lord, Esau, and look, Jacob is just behind us.”* Jacob then sends a second group of herdsmen and animals, and then likewise a third group with the same instructions. *“You are all to say the same thing,”* he said, *“to Esau when you see him. And be sure to tell him Jacob is right behind you.”* Now we listen very closely, as Jacob says to himself, *“Let me make peace with him by the gift that goes before me and after I shall look on his face, perhaps he will show me a kindly face.”*

Then during the night, Jacob gets up and sends his two wives and two concubines and eleven children across the Jabbok River, in the direction from which Esau was coming. When they reach the other side, he sends all his possessions across.

Then Jacob is left very much alone. He was in the dark night of his soul, coming to terms with the sins of his past, and terrified for his future. Now we will witness a great mysterious drama. In the night an Angel or supernatural “Man” appears and wrestles with him until the break of dawn. They wrestle for a long time, and when the Man sees he is not winning out in the struggle, he strikes Jacob’s hip and knocks it out of joint. Then the man says,

“Let me go, for it is dawn!” Jacob pants and says loudly,

“I will not let you go until you bless me!”

“What is your name?” the Man asks.

“Ya’akov” he replies, (which means “cheater”)...requiring Jacob to confess who he was at core, his moral crookedness.

“Your name will no longer be ‘Ya’akov,’” the man tells him. *“It is now ‘Yis-ra-El’, because you have struggled with both God and men, and have won out.”* Then, surprised, Jacob says,

“And what is your name?”

“Why do you ask?” the Man replies. And He blesses him there, and disappears.

After Jacob has rested and gathered his thoughts, he names the place “Peniel” which means “the face of God” in Hebrew, for he says to himself, *“I have seen God face to face and have come out alive.”* The sun is rising as Jacob leaves Peni-El, and he is limping because of his hip.

How fitting that the sun was setting when Jacob left home as a cheater. Now, limping along because of his hip, as a physical symbol of his inner change, he is “Yis-ra-El” (“one who has been overcome and thus overcame himself in order to be a prince with God”). And the sun is rising upon him for the new day. It is a fitting symbol, and indicates God’s favor rising over Jacob’s life!

Then in the distance he sees Esau coming with his 400 men. Jacob arranges his family into a column, with his two concubines and their children at the front, then Leah and her children next, and Rachel and baby Joseph last. Then Jacob goes on ahead of them to meet Esau. As he approaches his long estranged brother, he bows low seven times before him. Jacob braces for whatever comes. His brother is running straight for him. Will Esau now attack and kill Jacob, as he vowed to do years ago? No! Esau runs to meet him, and embraces him affectionately and kisses him. Both of them are in tears as they weep together. Jacob weeps all the more in thankful joy before God, knowing that God has answered his prayer, and given him peace with his brother.

Lessons

What Does “Israel” Mean? What Does it Mean to be “Israel”?

1.4.1 This Supernatural Man “blessed” Jacob and changed him. Because Jacob says that he has “seen God face to face” (Genesis 32:30), we conclude that the God-Man with whom Jacob wrestled was the pre-incarnate Messiah Jesus. Jacob had reached a point of despondency and desperation, a dark night of the soul. The Jewish people have in many ways been wrestling with this same Messiah through their long history, through many moments of desperation. They too must finally ask for and receive His blessing and be changed, or “born again” by embracing this same God-Man, Jesus as their Messiah. It is this position before God to which modern Israel must come. The prayer of the church must always be that Israel/the Jewish peoples’ desperation will turn to a dependence upon God in Messiah Yeshua, the “God-Man” with whom Jacob/Israel wrestled.

1.4.2 Jacob had been struggling, or wrestling all his life. This wrestling match with the Divine Man was climactic. He encountered God face-to-face and was changed. Jacob’s character was as bad as Esau’s in many ways. He had grabbed Esau’s heel as he emerged from the womb. He had cheated his brother out of the blessing. He had

contended with his uncle Laban over flocks and herds. When he returns home, he schemes and plots how he can escape the consequences of wronging his brother, how he could escape from reaping what he has sown. God changed his name because his nature was changed. Jewish tradition teaches that each person has an “evil inclination” and a “good inclination.” Jacob had to be left alone before God, and think about the trouble he was in because of his sins.

By asking Jacob what his name was, the God-Man was calling Jacob to confess that he is a “cheater,” that is a sinner. So when he confesses his sinfulness, and pleads for the God-Man to bless him, Jacob is physically changed in his hip. But this speaks of the change in his nature that is needed. This story teaches Israel/the Jewish people and all humanity that each person’s nature must be changed to be able choose the good inclination. This change comes through a personal encounter with God.

1.4.3 The name “Yis-ra-El” (Israel) predicts the character and destiny of the nation. The name “Israel” was first created and bestowed out of a situation of dependence on God. Jacob’s desperate wrestling with the God-Man was the founding event for the nation of Israel, as Jacob’s name is changed to “Israel.” This encounter with the God-Man was the decisive point in Jacob’s life history, as Jacob’s despair turned to submissive dependency on God, and thus spiritual transformation. God’s changing his name to “Israel” gives character to the nation of Israel/ the Jewish people. This is the first time in the Bible the name “Israel” is used. “Yis-ra-El” in Hebrew means *“One who strives or persists with God.”* Jacob was told *“because you have persisted with God and with men and you will overcome”* (Genesis 32:28). Jacob had despaired, thinking Esau and his army of 400 would slaughter him and enslave his family. Therefore he deeply and fervently prayed to God from his heart. Jacob overcame by allowing himself, his sinful nature, to be overcome by God, by finally submitting to God.

There is beautiful word play in the Hebrew that makes this rich in meaning. on words in the Hebrew that form the composite meaning of the name. Part of the name—“El” is the Semitic word for “God.” “Yis-ra” is from the Hebrew verb meaning “to strive” or “to struggle.” The sound “sar” in “Isra-El” alludes to the Hebrew word for “prince” which is “sar.” So the full meaning of the name is— *“one who strives and overcomes and himself to become a prince with God.”* This is what it means to fulfill the meaning of the name—“Yis-ra- El” (Israel). This is Israel’s/the Jewish people’s true destiny- to become princes and princesses of God.

1.4.4 Jacob became Israel. His twelve sons became the head of the twelve tribes of Israel. The people of Israel are often called the “B’nei Israel” (the “children of Israel.” Meaning the “people of Israel.”) Jacob/Israel as the very father of the people of Israel is the example, model or pattern of how each Jewish individual needs to be changed and thus overcome their natural fallen nature—by submitting to the God-Man, their Messiah. Jacob’s inner conflict of striving both against God and toward God is a picture of the fallen human condition, and so is instructive for all humanity. Hereby Israel functions in his role as an example people for all the nations.

1.4.5 A Jewish custom and traditions stems from this story. In Genesis 32:32 we are told that the “children of Israel” (the first time the “Hebrews” are referred to as such in Scripture), have a food restriction to memorialize this founding event of Israel, for all time. Jewish dietary laws prohibit eating the sinews and tendons of a slaughtered animal, near the hip. This is out of reverence for their founding ancestor’s wrestling all night with the mysterious God-Man, who dislocated Jacob’s hip.

Questions For Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How do you understand Jacob’s wrestling with the Divine Man as the founding event for the nation of Israel?
2. Do you think the God-Man with whom Jacob wrestled was Jesus the Messiah? How would you argue this to be true? (See Genesis 32: 24-30, and Hosea 12:3-5).
3. What brought about the peace between Jacob and Esau? Jacob’s plans and gifts? Or Jacob’s fervent prayer to God? Discuss
4. How is Jacob’s transformation due to his encounter with the God-Man a model for what the Jewish people need today? How is this story a model for all humanity?
5. Do you think every person needs a dark night of the soul, alone before God like Jacob, in order to be changed and receive a new nature? Why or why not?
6. Put in your own words what the name “Israel” means. How can the Jewish people fulfill the meaning of that name?
7. What is the most important message from this story for the Jewish people today?

Insights for Witness Among Jewish People

Story- A Modern Day Jacob Wrestled with God and Encountered Yeshua in the Process:

Moshe was Jewish, no question about it. He looked Jewish, talked Jewish and even ate Jewish. He loved his Jewish heritage, and with joy would celebrate all the Jewish feasts with his family in Brooklyn, New York. Year in and year out, they gathered every Friday night for their Sabbath meal and observed each feast. As a young man, Moshe could think of nothing he would change about this rich tradition into which he was so proud to have been born. This Jewish tradition brought the whole family together; and, for Moshe, it couldn’t get better than that.

However, as the years went on, Moshe began to sense something missing in the Jewish traditions. It wasn’t the feasts themselves, but perhaps it was about the true meaning behind them. He would ask questions, but never get answers. Not even the Rabbi seemed to know the answers. Moshe wondered and wondered yet he could never put his finger on what was it that was missing. Could it really be true that important links were missing from such a wonderful heritage? And if so, what were they? Once in a

while, he would ask himself, ever so silently, and sometimes in a prayer, “How can a tradition and culture be so rich and yet be so void of meaningful life answers?” This wrestling in his Moshe’s heart went on for what seemed like a lifetime until one day, that wonderful day, the mystery began to unfold.

Actually it was just an ordinary day. Moshe walked to school as he did every weekday morning for the past 3 years. Going to a secular college was very challenging for an observant young Jewish man, but Moshe faced it head on. After all, he wanted a good education so that he could eventually be a successful medical doctor, raise a family and experience life to the full.

Just before he got to the corner, on the way to the Student Center, a voice caught his attention. It was a voice that echoed in his ears; it was a sound of urgency pressing in on him. He found himself walking toward the man, forgetting where he was and where he was going. It wasn’t the way the man looked that attracted Moshe, but rather the sound of his voice and the words he was saying; words that Moshe had never heard before and never thought he would ever hear. This man was sincerely expressing love for the Jewish people. He was claiming that he felt he owed a debt to the Jewish people, a debt of gratitude, because of the wonderful heritage they give him as a Gentile and Christian. When Moshe heard these words, he was taken-a-back.

Is this man for real? Moshe had always been taught in the Yeshiva (religious Jewish school) that Christians were “Jew-killers”, and there was no doubt in his mind that this was true because history verified it. A person who is a Christian means that he is a follower of a man named “Jesus Christ,” and it was through that name that the Jewish people were mercilessly killed. The Christians called his Jewish people, “Christ-killers.” Hundreds of thousands of Jewish people were killed in his name, from the Crusades to Hitler, including all the years in between. Moshe had heard these facts from the stories passed down through his own family.

Moshe listened intently, awestruck by the man’s words. The man went on saying that the God he worshiped was “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob... the God of Israel!” “Like us Jews!” Moshe thought. The man seemed to know God in a personal way, a way that Moshe never experienced. This was unnerving! How could this be? What even gave him the right to say these things?

These words disturbed Moshe all day long. He was so preoccupied by what he heard that he couldn’t concentrate on the lectures or conversations at lunch. He was troubled from the inside out. It was like a wrestling match inside, completely rocking his world. If this man is real, and his words are true, that means that his own beliefs were based on falsehoods... beliefs about God, beliefs about who Christians are, ... and who is this “Yeshua” anyway? Did he call “Jesus” — “Yeshua”? That’s a Hebrew name!

The man also talked about sin. Moshe had to admit that he had done a lot of that growing up. But it was never spoken aboutjust guilt-ridden gestures to try to keep him ‘in line’. Shame poured out like venom from his parents because he ate bacon once at a friend’s house.

Moshe wrested all night as the words of the man kept hounding him. He did not sleep the whole night. Getting up early the next morning he left for school compelled to hear the man again. Would he be on the corner that morning, too? Secretly Moshe wanted to talk to him to see if he was genuine?

Sure enough, there he was near the same corner, making some of the same statements as the morning before. Moshe felt a driving force that gave him the strength and courage to approach the man. In hindsight, Moshe knows that it was the Holy Spirit of God.

The man was most gracious and had an answer for many of the questions Moshe had asked for years. Not only that, but his answers satisfied the longing in his soul like a gushing waterfall, filling up the dry, lonely, gapping void in his being.

This was it! He had discovered the missing piece he had sensed all these years... it was the Son of God, Yeshua, Jesus...the Jewish Messiah ! This peace he felt in his heart only grew as he received Yeshua and life that day. Moshe wrestled no more.

Insights

- 1. Jacob's nature being changed is an example for how Jewish people, and everyone else, need also to have their sinful nature changed in order to be in right relationship with God.** When it seems an appropriate time, share with your Jewish friends that Jacob's name was changed to "Israel" because his nature was changed. When he wrestled with the God-Man and finally submitted to God, he received His blessing. They also need to seek God for His blessing and have their old "Jacob nature" changed to a true "Israel nature." This only comes through believing in the Messiah Yeshua. The Spirit of God enters the believer and changes their nature so that the good inclination overpowers the evil inclination.
- 2. Jesus' name in Hebrew is "Yeshua." (Yeh- shu-ah), which means "salvation."** Because they are alienated from true New Testament faith, many Jewish people in the Western world actually think that "Christ" was Jesus' last name; he was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Christ. When speaking with Jewish people you may consider using Jesus' Hebrew name because for Hebrew speakers this name is so full of meaning and makes it plain that Jesus is Jewish. When you do this they may respond to you, "Oh you mean 'Yeshu.'" Be sure to clarify, "No not "Yeshu" but "Yeshua." "Yeshu" is an acronym in Hebrew sometimes used in Rabbinic Judaism that means "may his name be blotted out forever."
- 3. The God-Man with whom Jacob wrestled was very likely the Messiah Jesus before He was born as a man.** This person is called a "man" in the story, yet he acts like God, and blesses Jacob, changing his name to one who prevails with God and overcomes. This points out to us that he has both human and God-like characteristics. Jesus is the God-Man, both human and Divine. You can tell your Jewish friend this story of "Jacob wrestling with the Angel." Then discuss the story. Ask your Jewish friends to think about who this Person was, and suggest that He was the Messiah.