“Stranger at Night”

(A Commentary on Genesis 32:22-30
by Vanessa Lovelace, Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible
Interdenominational Theological Center)

Reprinted with permission

The story of Jacob’s encounter with a stranger at night belongs to the larger Jacob and Esau cycle (Genesis 25:12-35:28).

Jacob was the younger of twins born to Isaac and Rebekah. His life had been replete with acts of duplicity. Jacob’s deceit deprives his brother Esau of his birthright as the firstborn son and his blessing from their father (Genesis 27:32-36). Rebekah learns that Esau intends to kill Jacob and sends him to her brother in Paddan-aram in Haran (a second version has him going to his mother’s kin to find a wife [Genesis 28:1-2]). Jacob’s story is a story of crossings, both geographically and metaphorically.

Jacob’s exile in Haran

Jacob flees his home and eventually arrives in Haran, where he makes his mother’s family’s acquaintance. While in Haran he acquires not one but two wives, the daughters of his mother’s brother, Laban, and their slave girls. Jacob probably intended to return to his father’s home with his wives and children after a reasonable amount of time. However, an ironic set of circumstances forces him to remain in the land of his exile in the service of his father-in-law for an extended period of time. In all Jacob ends up spending twenty years in Haran. The text does not provide us with insight into how Jacob felt leaving his family to live in a land with an alien culture and alien gods, despite living with his mother’s kin.

The relationship between Jacob and his father-in-law had become tense. God takes notice of this and sends Jacob a message in a dream that the time had come for him to return to his native land and to his father, Isaac (Genesis 31:11). Once again Jacob takes flight, but this time he does not

leave empty-handed. During the interim, Jacob had acquired two wives, two slave girls, eleven children, and great wealth manifested by his numerous slaves, flocks, camels, and asses (Genesis 30:43). There was just one thing: his return home would mean crossing the path he most sought to avoid. In order to return to Canaan, Jacob had to face Esau. The prospect of a confrontation with his brother frightened Jacob. He believed that Esau still sought to kill him.

Boundary crossings

In preparation for meeting Esau, Jacob dispatches messengers ahead of him to seek his brother's favor (Genesis 32:5-6). He learns that Esau has already gathered an army of 400 to meet him. Jacob devises a plan to divide his entourage into two camps. He sends one convoy with gifts ahead of him with the hopes of appeasing Esau. Jacob is now at a crossroad literally and figuratively: he has arrived at the ford of the Jabbok that is the boundary between Laban on one side and Esau on the other, but he has also come to a place where, he believes, he faces life or death.

The Hebrew verb *abar,* "to pass over, through, by" appears four times in this week's lesson, although the number of appearances is obscured by English translations. The first two mentions of "crossing" are in v. 22 (Hebrews 23). That night Jacob took his wives, slave girls, and children and crossed (Hebrew root: *abar*) the ford (Hebrew root: *abar*) of the river Jabbok; literally, he "crossed over the crossing." The other two are in v. 23 where it states that Jacob sent his family across (Hebrew root: *abar*) and all that belonged to him across (Hebrew root: *abar*). Not only were they crossing from one side of the river to the other but they were also crossing over into an unknown new beginning.

Strangers in the night

Jacob remained behind on the side of the Jabbok opposite his family. Alone in the dark, Jacob is attacked by an unknown man. The man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak, but the man could not overpower Jacob. The reference to daybreak was to cue the ancient audience that the attacker was not human. More than one commentary has noted the belief in antiquity that demons and spirits inhabited the night and rivers. His purpose for attacking Jacob is undetermined. Was it his assailant's intent just to prevent Jacob from crossing the river or to kill him? Whatever was his purpose, it appears that he was only potent at night. With the day about to break, this superhuman, it seems, would lose his power.

With no time to spare, the stranger reaches out and strikes Jacob on his hip, putting his hip-socket out of joint while he continued to wrestle with Jacob. He repeats his plea that Jacob let him go before daybreak. Jacob replies that he will not let the unknown figure go until he blesses him. This request must have come as a surprise to the reader. What blessing and why would he expect that this stranger could deliver it? What has Jacob surmised about this figure based on his struggle with him?

A new name

The man asked Jacob his name. He answered, "Jacob." The man replied that his name was no longer Jacob, but Israel. The reason given for the name change is explained as: "You have striven

with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Genesis 32:28). The reader presumes at this point that the blessing is the new name. Jacob in turn asks him to please tell him his name. Rather than answer Jacob the man replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" (v. 29) It was there at that moment that he blessed Jacob.

Jacob renamed the place called Penuel, Peniel: "face of God," for he had seen God "face to face" (v. 30), yet he had not died. This response, with v. 28, has led some commentators to conclude that Jacob's unidentified assailant was God. There at the crossing Jacob has crossed yet another boundary. The man who left Haran as the patriarch of a family including 11 children would become the progenitor of a nation of 12 tribes named for 12 sons.