

# The Renaming of Jacob

(Genesis 32:22-29)

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The Renaming of Jacob (Genesis 32:22-29)<sup>1</sup>

The story of the renaming of Jacob has been amongst some of the more confusing stories of the Old Testament owing to its ambiguity and apparent lack of explained motivation on the part of the characters. A plethora of different explanations, theologies, and exegeses have sprouted from this one event in Biblical history. In taking into consideration just some of these, a strong underlying thread slowly becomes evident within the fabric of the story. Each successive segment of the renaming reinforces a message of divine superiority over mortal men – a declaration that says to Jacob: “You are merely a man; next to God you are finite and limited.”

Renaming can only occur when names are already in existence, and it is these pre-existing names that we must first consider. Names had a high degree of importance in the Patriarchal Era (the word ‘name’ alone appears 928 times in the Bible)<sup>2</sup> and since this paper deals heavily with the significance and importance of names and name-changing, it is worthwhile to consider exactly how names were viewed in the past.

<sup>1</sup> While the entire story of the renaming of Jacob is often taken to comprise of Genesis 32:22-32 (23-33 in the Hebrew Bible), “Most exegetes regard v.33 (Hebrew Bible) as a subsequent addition” (Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, p. 514) because it offers the rationale for how a particular dietary restriction of the nation of Israel came about. Verses 30 and 31 can also be argued as an etiology for the name of Peniel, but since they help to describe Jacob’s own view of his assailant, they will be briefly considered in the analysis of the story (see p. 3, last paragraph). Also note that, for the purposes of this paper, all Biblical references will be in the New International Version (NIV) and will cite the versification of the English Bible (as opposed to the Hebrew Bible) unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> James Strong, *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, p. 801-804

In the ancient world, according to James King West, “to know the name [of someone]... was to possess a degree of power over its bearer.”<sup>3</sup> Roland de Vaux expands on this significance:

“Among primitive peoples, and throughout the ancient East, the name denotes the essence of a thing: to name it is to know it, and, consequently, to have power over it. In the earthly paradise, when God allowed men to name the animals (Gn 2:19-20), it was a sign that he was putting them under man’s power (cf. the parallel story in Gn 1:28). To know the name of a person is to be able to hurt him (hence ‘taboo names’ among primitive peoples, and secret names among the Egyptians), or to be able to do him good (e.g. Moses, whom God knew by name, Ex 33:12, 17).”<sup>4</sup>

Another point of note on the importance of names in ancient times is that “the name was closely linked with its bearer in such a way that the name contained something of the character of the one who bore it. Thus, in giving his name, Jacob at the same time had to reveal his whole nature.”<sup>5</sup> De Vaux further explains that “since the name defines the essence, it reveals the character and destiny of the bearer.”<sup>6</sup>

Frances Manly’s article recognizes two possibilities in this revealing of names. (1) Jacob’s opponent is a demon, and Jacob reveals his name as if to announce that he is a match for his assailant, or (2) Jacob’s opponent is divine and, by revealing his name, Jacob is, in fact, revealing his inherent character flaw (this will be covered with greater depth later in the section on the meaning of Jacob’s name).<sup>7</sup> If a person’s name can be said to contain the essence of its bearer, the latter possibility seems more likely.

<sup>3</sup> James King West, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 158, as quoted in Frances Manly’s ‘Jacob at the Jabbok; An Exegesis of Genesis 32:22-32’, *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*, 48(1-2), p. 35

<sup>4</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions*, p. 43

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*, p. 321

<sup>6</sup> De Vaux, p. 43

<sup>7</sup> Manly, p. 39

Athanasios Hatzopoulos appears to support this idea by pointing out that “Demythologizing does not do justice to the spirit of the Bible when it leaves out the element of sacredness, which rests wholly on grace instituted by God penetrating into everyday life”<sup>8</sup> (By God, of course, we are referring to the same God recognized and worshipped by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). This view apparently comes from a Christian perspective, but what Hatzopoulos says applies to any other group or institution that subscribes to the veracity of the Bible. This paper is targeted at understanding the story as it was told rather than whether or not it might have been based on or altered from an original form. Hence, while this does not discount the possibility of option (1) this paper will only consider option (2) for the sake of a more thorough and focused analysis.

Just because we say that Jacob’s opponent is not a demon does not necessarily imply he is divine and it may seem insufficient merely to accept the widely held, *modern*, viewpoint that Jacob’s mysterious assailant is God (or at the very least an angel of God). As such, it is necessary to determine why the conclusion can be drawn, based on the way the story was presented, that the man is, in fact, a manifestation of God or an angel of God.

The most obvious reference can be found in the Bible itself in Hosea 12:3-4 that mentions Jacob’s struggle with the angel (although his struggle with God is also mentioned, highlighting the Biblical convention of taking the term ‘angel’ as an allusion to God whether in authoritative representation or in some other metaphysical sense).

A second, almost equally obvious reference is Jacob’s naming of Peniel (meaning ‘Face of God’). In Genesis 32:30, Jacob also gives the reason for his naming of the place when he says, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” This

<sup>8</sup> Athanasios Hatzopoulos, *Ecumenical Review*, 48, p. 508

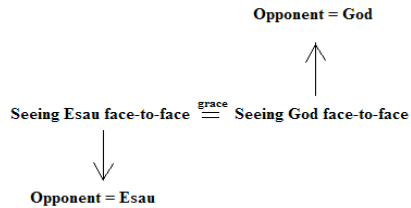
notion, that anyone who beholds such an epiphany has to die, is not an isolated one and carries through to the nation of Israel both during and after the exodus (Exodus 24:10, 33:23, Judges 6:22-23, 13:22-23).

Third, the man himself, upon giving Jacob his new name ‘Israel’, tells Jacob that it is because Jacob “struggled with God and with men” and overcame or prevailed (Genesis 32:28). In previous chapters, it is obvious how Jacob has struggled and succeeded with men and so, by inference, the struggle with God could very well refer to this particular struggle with the man.

If that is insufficient, Jacob also compares seeing his brother’s face with seeing God’s face (Genesis 33:10). If we consider Jacob’s most recent struggle with his mysterious assailant in Genesis 32, the possible parallelism is clear. Both individuals showed Jacob grace. The man apparently had power over Jacob when he wrenched or dislocated Jacob’s hip with a touch of his hand (some versions use ‘strike’ but the general belief is that it was a touch that had a marked supernatural degree to it). Similarly, Esau arrived with 400 men and probably could have easily wiped Jacob out if he had so chosen. In terms of verbal threads, Robert T. Snell indicates that in the Hebrew text, the term ‘face-to-face’ occurs five times in Genesis 32:20-21<sup>9</sup> (since the Hebrew text is mentioned, these verse references are most probably those from the Hebrew Bible) with regards to Jacob’s anticipated encounter with Esau. Thus, with so many uses of the term ‘face-to-face’ in the context of Jacob’s meeting with Esau, and Jacob’s comparison of meeting Esau with an epiphany, *plus* the similar use of ‘face-to-face’ in Jacob’s explanation for the name Peniel, one possible deduction is that the man with whom Jacob wrestles is *indeed* God or a manifestation of God.

<sup>9</sup> Robert T. Snell, ‘Between Text and Sermon, Genesis 32:22-32’, *Interpretation*, 50(3), p. 277

A diagram linking the uses of 'face-to-face' to simplify this is shown:



In summary, there are at least four pieces of evidence (or, at the very least, strong arguments) to support the claim that the man whom Jacob wrestles with is divine (the fourth argument being a form of analytical inference). As such, it should be safe to explore the rest of the analysis of the importance of names and renaming in the context of Jacob's encounter with a supernatural, divine being – God.

Having established that, we return to the notion of Jacob's admission of his character in revealing his name. Of course, it can, and has, been argued that Jacob is merely informing his opponent of his identity, even *if* a person's name generally reflects his nature. However, since we are basing the explorative analysis of this paper on the assumption that the man is God, there obviously would be no reason for why an omniscient being would need to know a mere mortal's name. Furthermore, additional references from the Bible (Exodus 3:13, and, debatably, Luke 8:30) show other instances when the asking of a name suggests more than just a request (or potential request as the case may be in Exodus 3:13) for informational knowledge. Understanding that Jacob is being asked for more than just his literal name brings us to the *meaning* of the name itself.

According to A. E. Cundall, "Jacob was born clutching the heel (Heb. ' *q b* ) of his elder twin Esau (Gn. 25:26), so the name given to him was 'he clutches'"<sup>10</sup>. Figuratively, however, Jacob's name can also be taken to mean 'supplant' (King James Version) or 'deceive' (New International Version), taking reference from Genesis 27:36. In this verse, Esau observes: "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has deceived me these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" This etymological link between Jacob's name and deception can be further corroborated by looking at the three instances of deception in Jacob's life. The first occurs in Genesis 25:29-34 in which Jacob deceives his way into getting his brother's birthright in exchange for a bowl of soup. Even if this is argued to be not so much a case of deception as scheming, there are still two other clear cases of deception. The first of these two occurs in Genesis 27:1-29 when Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, deceive Isaac into giving Esau's blessing to Jacob. In the second case (Genesis 30:34-43), he deceives Laban, his employer and uncle, so that he ultimately prospers, at least in terms of the increase in his flocks of sheep.

Stanley D. Walters says, "To utter his name was to speak his character – 'cheat' – making good the lack of any confession in the prayer, and acknowledging that his alienation from Esau was not an episode but a way of life."<sup>11</sup> In this reference, the "prayer" that lacked the confession of Jacob's name refers to his earlier appeal to God to preserve him from his brother, Esau (Genesis 32:11). Thus, the Anchor Bible is pointing out that in said prayer, he made no mention or admission of his character. Now, however, in revealing his name to his assailant, he is acknowledging not only that he has deceived but that he is a deceiver in lifestyle as well (i.e. it is not an isolated, one-time event). In

<sup>10</sup> A. E. Cundall, 'Jacob', *New Bible Dictionary* (Third Edition), p. 537

<sup>11</sup> Stanley D. Walters, 'Jacob Narrative', *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Vol. 3), p. 605

making this admission, Jacob has thus emphasized just how imperfect he is as a human. Contrasted with the nature of his opponent, this sets the stage for future comparisons between God and mortal.

Now that Jacob has acknowledged who he is, the way is open for his assailant to change his name. Along with giving an entire analysis into the Biblical Hebrew idiom “they shall say no more”, Victor P. Hamilton, in summary, indicates that the passage from Genesis 32:28 infers that “the stigma of heel and supplanter”<sup>12</sup> will no longer be attached to Jacob. In place of who he once was, Jacob is now to be called ‘Israel’ because he has “struggled with God and with men” and has prevailed.

In analyzing this, we first come to the act of the renaming. If the man can give Jacob a name, he obviously knows what that name is and, by virtue of De Vaux and West’s definitions previously mentioned, he would indirectly be showing that he has a certain degree of power over Jacob. Even if the act of knowing a person’s name did not give one power over the bearer, there is still the issue, raised by von Rad, of how a person’s character is reflected in his name. Anyone who can simply declare a change in someone else’s character obviously has some power over the bearer of the name who evidently cannot do the same to himself.

The asserting of one’s authority over another through a name-change is further supported by cases of master-slave or master-servant name-changing. De Vaux makes references to occurrences of such name-changing:

“The pharaoh gave Joseph the name of Saphenath Paneah (Gn 41:45). The chief eunuch changed the names of Daniel, Ananias, Misael and Azarias into Baltassar, Shadrak, Meshak and Abed Nego (Dn 1:6-7). When the

<sup>12</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50*, p. 333

pharaoh installed Elyaqim as king of Judah, he made him take the name of Joiaqim (2 K 23:34), and similarly Nabuchodonosor changed the name of Mattanyah, whom he set on the throne, to Sedecias (2 K 24:17).<sup>13</sup>

Simply put, whether rooted in practices and conventions of ancient times or by folklorist definition, the ability of Jacob’s assailant to rename him shows his authority and power over Jacob, a contrast that overshadows any suggestion that Jacob might be on top of the situation by having refused to let the man go until he blessed Jacob earlier in Genesis 32:26.

Having made that point, we now go into the actual name given to Jacob. Since we are exploring the possible meanings of the story as it was told orally, we will not be delving too much into the etiology of Israel (the nation) vis-à-vis Israel (the man). We instead explore the possible meanings of Israel as it might have been intended before any form of etiology entered the picture.

Hamilton, who focuses extensively on individual meanings of words or phrases used in the story, states that the original word for ‘you have struggled’ is ‘*riṭ*’. The Septuagint, Vulgate, and Peshitta versions all derive ‘*riṭ*’ from the Aramaic word ‘*rr*’ which means ‘be strong’ while the Targum Onkelos (or Onqelos) describes Jacob as having prevailed as a prince before God and men.<sup>14</sup> The King James Version also alludes to Jacob as a prince, saying (in Genesis 32:28) “for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.” If we consider both the Targum Onkelos and the King James Version with reference to the Septuagint, Vulgate, and Peshitta, we might say that Jacob proves himself to be strong or powerful (as a Prince is strong or powerful in his kingdom) in God’s presence. Whether that be in the tenacity with which he holds onto the

<sup>13</sup> De Vaux, p. 40

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, p. 334

man or the degree of success he has in the act of wrestling, he has proven a certain level of his worth or strength to God.

The name 'Israel' is obviously a theophoric one, evidenced by the word 'El' in 'Israel' ('El' being one of the names by which the God of the Israelites was known). In explaining names that are derived from 'El', De Vaux says that they "express a religious idea, the power or the mercy of God, the help expected from him, the feeling of kinship with him."<sup>15</sup>

In the end, Hamilton comes to a conclusion that, if accepted, poses great significance to the whole point of this paper. His conclusion is that 'Israel' must be interpreted as " 'El will rule (or strive),' or 'Let El rule,' rather than 'he has striven with El.' For one thing, it is very unusual for the theophoric element in a personal name to serve as anything but subject."<sup>16</sup> If this definition of Israel were to be taken, it would sum up and conclude the paper nicely since it evidently appoints Jacob as a testament to God's superiority and rule over men.

However, with the actual intended meaning of 'Israel' left inconclusive, although many possibilities are given, the reason for the naming needs to be reviewed. Jacob is said to have struggled with both God and men, and have overcome or prevailed. Here, one wonders if it means that Jacob has prevailed *over* God and men. It is already evident that he has prevailed over men, having outwitted his brother, his father, and his uncle. However, to say that Jacob has prevailed over God seems to suggest that he has won the fight with his attacker. In this case, Westermann points out that we "cannot conclude from the request that Jacob is the victor; the struggle remains so far undecided. A struggle

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<sup>15</sup> De Vaux, p. 45

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, p. 334

that is interrupted prematurely is everywhere regarded as undecided. Because his opponent is hard-pressed, Jacob can make a demand of him."<sup>17</sup> Hence, in Westermann's opinion, the fact that Jacob can ask a blessing from the man does not necessarily imply that he is winning or has won, especially since *he* is the one who walks away with the limp. Instead, the focus seems to be on the notion that "if one is to receive blessing (or is to inherit leadership) then one must be assertive – even against God!"<sup>18</sup>

Another way to see the reason given by the man for changing Jacob's name is by separating the two parts of the phrase in Genesis 32:28. In this sense, "because you have struggled with God" becomes one part, "and with man, and have overcome" becomes another part. By this division, Jacob is accredited with his new name because he has struggled with God (with no outcome necessarily concluded upon) and has both struggled *and* succeeded with men.

Ultimately, after what he has gone through with God and men, Jacob henceforth receives a new name that marks this struggle. By De Vaux's explanation as to the significance of names in ancient times, a change in name would mean a change in destiny and character. Johannes Pederson says that should "a man change his character entirely, and the contents of his soul are altered, he often must have a new name. Also elsewhere it is a well-known custom that people are given a new name when entering upon a new phase, and that they frequently have several names."<sup>19</sup> And so, with his new name, Jacob now has a change in destiny marked by his struggle with God. This destiny is most clearly tied, etiologically, with Israel as a nation. While this paper will not go into detail

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<sup>17</sup> Westermann, p. 518

<sup>18</sup> Frederick Carlson Holmgren, 'Holding Your Own Against God: Genesis 32:22-32 (In the Context of Genesis 31-33)', *Interpretation*, 44, p. 11

<sup>19</sup> Johannes Pederson, *Israel, Its Life and Culture*, III-IV, p. 253

with regards to the significance of Jacob's new name with the future nation of Israel (since we wish to find meaning to the story in its original context as far as possible), it is nonetheless interesting to note that the covenant God made with Abraham (to make him into a great nation) had already been promised to Jacob at Bethel even *before* his name was changed (Genesis 28:10-15).

In this case, it is important to give some consideration to why there needs to be this change of name (that affects his destiny) if God had already planned out Jacob's destiny. Hans Walter Wolff says:

"The life of the individual in ancient Israel is always firmly integrated in the bonds of his family and thus of his people. Wherever he is set apart or isolated, something unusual, if not something threatening, is happening, although it is ultimately something essential if a man is truly to become a man."<sup>20</sup>

While, taken to reflect the story of Jacob's struggle, this quote might seem anachronistic (since it reflects on a belief of a later time than the actual event of the story). Wolff nevertheless raises an interesting point (underlined in this paper) which may apply apart from later culture. His point suggests that the trial that Jacob faces alone is a requirement for his maturation or development.

Furthermore, Jacob's assailant, being God and already being assumed to know who Jacob is, evidently has a reason for asking Jacob to admit who he is before giving him a new name. It is possible that this is a requirement or a test that Jacob has to undergo or pass before being able to fully realize the fruition of God's covenant. As Fredrick C. Holmgren says, "This question concerning his name was not a chance

<sup>20</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, p. 214

question. It was intended to remind Jacob of another time when Isaac, his father, asked 'Who are you, my son?' and Jacob, the deceiver, answered, 'Esau.' Now, before God, he admits who he really is" and makes the "decision to turn away from his deceptive ways."<sup>21</sup> Keeping in mind Jacob's proof of strength in God's sight, as explained earlier, this represents an ascension from a 'quality' derived from human capability – deception – to a strength that is more closely tied to and derived from the divine.

Briefly, from a Christian perspective, the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* explains that "Now that Jacob had acknowledged God as the source of blessing and was about to reenter the Promised Land, the Lord acknowledged Jacob as his servant by changing his name."<sup>22</sup> Though a perspective from a relatively modern period, it is nevertheless a noteworthy one worth considering, especially under the recognition that any other source we consider is only one of many possibilities.<sup>23</sup> In this case, the renaming is an act of recognition of Jacob on God's part.

Finally, a purpose of the renaming of Jacob may actually be to put to rest Jacob's *own* doubts. As Snell says, "In spite of three occasions of direct divine revelation (28:10-22; 31:3; 32:1-2) and God's manifest and manifold faithfulness to the promise to keep him safe wherever he goes (28:15), Jacob returns to the land of promise filled with fear and anxiety and seeks yet again to secure his own existence (32:1-20)."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Jacob's name change *is* seen to be a necessity (for a variety of possible reasons) even though God apparently already affirmed Jacob's destiny earlier. More importantly, the change is made within the decision and power of God, which shows that

<sup>21</sup> Holmgren, p. 9

<sup>22</sup> *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, p. 57

<sup>23</sup> Manly, p. 43

<sup>24</sup> Snell, p. 239

all the given reasons above still come under the umbrella of God's authority to change Jacob's name.

Moving back to the plot, now that the man has given Jacob a new name, Jacob turns the tables and asks the man to divulge *his* name instead. The big difference between Jacob asking the man's name and the man asking Jacob's name is the use of the word 'please'. As Hamilton says, "In asking Jacob his name, the man need not add 'please' as Jacob did when he asks his question. The man's question is introduced as a statement ('he said...'). Jacob's request is introduced as an inquiry and a statement (lit., 'Jacob inquired and he said...')." <sup>25</sup> This seems to take out of the equation the likelihood that Jacob wants the man's name so that he can have power over him. The meek way in which he asks the man's name seems to have more similarity with another event in which the parents of Samson ask the angel of the Lord for *his* name so that they might honor him when his word comes true (Judges 13:17). Maybe Jacob is behaving in line with what von Rad says – that "embedded in this most urgent of all human questions, this question about the name, is all man's need, all his boldness before God. One must perceive here especially the longing for God, and our narrative shows that there is no need which can smother this ancient human thirst to find God and to bind him to oneself." <sup>26</sup>

Alternatively if we treat the man distinctly as God (or as an angel or representative who speaks on behalf of God rather than an angel in service to but independent of God), and we consider the genuine practice of polytheism going on during that period of time (evidenced in Genesis 35:2), another possibility is that Jacob is aware that his attacker is divine but he wishes to know for sure which divinity it is with whom

<sup>25</sup> Hamilton, p. 335

<sup>26</sup> Von Rad, p. 322

he has striven/struggled. The setting of the struggle is at daybreak when the sun is about to rise and Stephen A. Geller notes that "The connection of divinities with stars is familiar from places like Judg. 5:20, Job 38:7 (*k\_k\_bē b\_qer // b\_nē \_l\_hīm*)" <sup>27</sup>, where 'stars' refers to the dawn star (sun). Under this possibility, Jacob might realize he is wrestling with a manifestation of a divinity, but he does not yet know *which* divinity.

Or perhaps, true to his old ways, Jacob really believes that he can gain control of the man and, by importuning the man with fawning courtesy, is trying to trick the man into revealing his name just as Jacob tricked his kinsmen. This, however, does not hold much credence in the perspective of this paper that pursues the point of view that the renaming of Jacob reflects a change of character and the discarding of old traits (i.e. deceptiveness). With this reason discounted, all that remain are possibilities that point to the humbled stance of a man before his God.

Whatever the reason, the man's next response provides Jacob with anything but the answer he seeks. The man answers the question with another question: "Why do you ask my name?" (Genesis 32:29). The Zondervan Study Bible says "Such a request of God is both unworthy and impossible to fulfill." <sup>28</sup> Another possible way to read it is with the unspoken rhetorical question by God: "Jacob, don't you realize who I am?" <sup>29</sup>

The encounter between Manoah and the angel offers a similar situation except that in this case, an inferred reason is given for the refusal to give a name. In Judges 13:18, the angel says, "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding." One way of looking at this is in its literal form, in that information such as that about the divine

<sup>27</sup> Stephen A. Geller, 'The Struggle at the Jabbok: The Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative', *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 14, p. 46

<sup>28</sup> Zondervan, p. 57

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, p. 336

might not be within the comprehensive abilities of Man to begin with, or, as John Dominic Crossan puts it (in one of two possible conclusions of his on God), “God is outside my story, and I have just argued that what is ‘out there’ is completely unknowable.”<sup>30</sup> If we take this apparent parallelism to the Jacob story, we might hence be inclined to add in the reason ‘It is beyond understanding’ and apply it to the man’s own response to Jacob.

In the end, the important thing is that the man now has openly expressed his power and authority over Jacob first by naming him and now by refusing to reveal his own name – a name that, we have found, carries the essence and character of a person – and it is only at this point that he blesses Jacob as requested, making it clear that this “blessing is not extorted out of weakness but freely given out of his strength.”<sup>31</sup>

And so we come to the much anticipated end of the paper. Through the length of this paper, a step-by-step analysis has been given from the moment of Jacob revealing his name to the man’s refusal to answer Jacob’s similar query. A variety of explanations have been explored as to the meanings and motivations behind each facet of the renaming. However, a common thread that runs through this sub-story of Jacob’s struggle is the balance of power between the man (God) and Jacob. In everything that the man says or does, he shows his power over Jacob (e.g. the way he asks Jacob’s name, the reason for asking Jacob’s name, the changing of Jacob’s name, the man’s refusal to give his own name, etc.). On Jacob’s part, everything he says serves to pronounce the huge gap between the power and authority of a mortal and that of God (e.g. Jacob’s admission of his character and the way in which he asks for the man’s name). Thus, while earlier

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<sup>30</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, p. 25

<sup>31</sup> Manly, p. 41

parts of the story of Jacob’s struggle seem to portray him as having a degree of physical power over the man, this part shows how everything he says is consistent with the subservient status of a man confronting his superior.

In understanding the meaning and motivations behind the renaming of Jacob, a very strong underlying theme becomes clear – that of the man’s superiority to Jacob, that is, the superiority of Divinity to Mortal, of God to Man.

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