

# GENESIS 32

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## Verses 1–21: Jacob Prepared to Confront Esau

The conflict with Laban was resolved, but now Jacob had to reenter Canaan to confront his brother Esau (Genesis 32:3). The last time Esau was mentioned in the narrative, he was plotting to kill Jacob, which prompted Jacob’s flight to Laban in the first place (27:41–45).<sup>1</sup> Jacob was faced with uncertainty upon his return about where things stood between him and his brother. Thus, once again the story takes a dramatic turn. Jacob sent messengers to Esau, and they returned to report that Esau was coming, accompanied by four hundred men (32:3–6). Jacob “was greatly afraid and distressed” (verse 7). As one scholar observed, “his anxiety is palpable” and quickly “turns . . . into a panic.”<sup>2</sup>

Jacob prepared for the confrontation first by splitting his camp into two groups so that if Esau attacked one, the other, at least, could flee to safety (verses 7–8). Jacob then had a series of gifts, or “tributes,” sent to Esau (verses 13–21) with the message, “They be thy *servant* Jacob’s; it is a present sent unto *my lord* Esau” (verse 18; emphasis added). Jacob was deliberate in using standard ancient Near Eastern protocols for addressing one’s overlord—calling himself a “servant” and addressing Esau as his “lord” (verses 4, 18, 20).<sup>3</sup> This adds a layer of irony to the episode since it was Jacob who the Lord promised would be the overlord between the two.<sup>4</sup> Jacob also prayed to God for protection from Esau, reminding the Lord of His previous promises (verses 9–12). Thus, “Jacob combines his trust in God’s protection with his own actions.”<sup>5</sup>

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1 Dennis T. Olson, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gavanta and David Peterson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 24.

2 Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 61.

3 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 254.

4 Robert Alter, trans., *The Hebrew Bible*, 3 vols. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:119, note on verse 5.

5 Olson, “Genesis,” 24.

## Verses 22–32: Jacob Wrestled with God

Jacob had a divine encounter as he departed Canaan (Genesis 28:11–22), and now as he returned, he once again had a dramatic encounter with God.<sup>6</sup> As Jacob was preparing to cross over the Jabbok River, he was stopped by a “man” who “wrestled . . . with him until the breaking of the day” (32:24). As the struggle between the two ensued, Jacob injured his hip or thigh (verse 25) but demanded a blessing from the man (verse 26). His name was changed to “Israel,” and Jacob realized that he just faced off with God Himself. He thus called the place “Peniel,” meaning “face of God,” and marveled, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (verse 30).

The story is filled with wordplay on both the names Jacob and Israel: “he wrestled” (verse 24) in Hebrew is *ye’abaq*, similar to both the name Jacob (*Ya’aqob*) and the river’s name, Jabbok (*Yaboq*) in Hebrew;<sup>7</sup> “prevailed” (verses 25, 28) is *yakol* and thus sounds similar to Jacob; “prince” (verse 28; “struggled” or “striven” in the New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, English Standard Version, and Lexham English Bible) is *sarah* and sounds similar to the root in Israel (*Yisra’el*), which could mean “he strove with God,” “God rules,”<sup>8</sup> or “let God prevail.” As President Russell M. Nelson recently taught, “the very name of *Israel* refers to a person who is *willing* to let God prevail in his or her life.”<sup>9</sup>

## Credits

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6 Olson, “Genesis,” 24–25.

7 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis through Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Scholarship* (New York, NY: Melton Research Center, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966), 204.

8 Wenham, “Genesis,” 61.

9 Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” Oct. 2020 general conference, online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](http://churchofjesuschrist.org).