ENCOUNTERS IN THE DARK

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Identity Formation in the Jacob Story

Noel Forlini Burt

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABS	Archaeology and Biblical Studies
Amph.	Plautus, *Amphitruo*
ANES	*Ancient Near Eastern Studies*
ASV	American Standard Version
BDB	Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1907.
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CC	Continental Commentaries
DDD	Toorn van der, Karel, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1995.
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1995, 2004.
IJTS	*International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*
JANESCU	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JES	*Journal of Ecumenical Studies*
JESWTR	*Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*
JRFM	*Journal for Religion, Film and Media*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KJV	King James Version
LW	Luther's Works
LXX	Septuagint

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MT	Masoretic Text
NEB	New English Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NJPS	*Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text*
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBS	Oxford Bible Series
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Old Testament Message
ResQ	*Restoration Quarterly*
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SCJ	*Stone-Campbell Journal*
Sir	Sirach
TLOT	Jenni, Ernst, with assistance from Claus Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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Introduction

Interpretive Issues

The Jabbok encounter (Gen 32:22–32) is set within a narrative that is richly complex, not least because of the relational interplay of the protagonist and his god. The faces of the protagonist, Jacob, and antagonist, Elohim/Ish (God/Man), are both revealed and concealed in their darkened encounters with each other. Their identities are, like the scene in which the story is situated, obscure. This obscurity leads Samuel Tongue (2014, 3) to express a sentiment similar to my own: "I have been attracted to this story as an exemplary text that raises dust, obscuring the scene, provoking many commentators to try and interpret what is going on before the dust settles again." The obscurity of the story—demonstrated through the images/metaphors of name, face, wound, darkness, and crossing—drew me to it in the first place. Those images draw me still and compel me to make the central claim of this study: that the poetics and rhetoric of the narrative around name, face, wound, darkness, and crossing constitute a fruitful way of understanding embodied and contested individual and collective identity in the exilic/postexilic period. The driving theme is one of identity—the identities of the characters, of the community that produced the text, and of contemporary readers who engage the text. These multiple identities correlate to the multiplicity of meaning within the text itself and the rhetorical reasons for that multiplicity.

The Jabbok text is one that asks, like Elohim, "Why do you ask my name?" Why ask for one meaning, for one name, for one face, when many possibilities have opened themselves? In its unwillingness to surrender to and to be the target of a singular interpretation, the story continues to unfold and to multiply meaning (Derrida 1995b, 85).[1] Therefore, I also

1. Derrida's assessment of apophatic literature rings true for the Jabbok story: "This literature forever elliptical, taciturn, cryptic, obstinately withdrawing, however,

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explore the link between *how* the text multiplies meaning and *why* the text multiplies meaning. This is a text that asks about names, reassigns names, and is a discursive space for a community to reconsider identity, especially in the postexilic period.

Methodology

My method of approaching the text is decidedly interdisciplinary and eclectic. Grounding my approach in biblical narrative criticism, I use the poststructuralist insights of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. I also draw on collective memory studies, feminist analysis, and ethical analysis through Emmanuel Levinas and others, as well as theology. I am a confessional, orthodox Christian scholar. I wrestle seriously with these texts precisely *because they are my texts*. These texts are, in one way or another, texts I uphold as sacred, inspired, true, and meaningful in my own life. The methodologies I work with in this study both converge and diverge from traditional, orthodox Jewish and Christian belief. In particular, convergence occurs around the nature of God: God has desire, God feels things deeply, God is ineffable, beyond us, to name a few. These methodologies are helpful tools, both to affirm faith commitments and to wrestle deeply with those faith commitments. For me, wrestling with the faith is at the heart of genuine relationship to God. Christians at all times and in all places have wrestled with God. Jacob's story captures this. Allowing God to hold on to us even as we wrestle with God is at the heart of Judeo-Christian faith. The God available for wrestling is at the heart of this book, too. Ultimately, *Encounters in the Dark* is a book about God, and it is a book both for the academy and for the church.

As already mentioned, biblical narrative criticism is the grounding methodology for this book. In order to encounter the dark, I acknowledge that faces must be put on the characters in the story. Indeed, the language of character and story is the language I use throughout, so I refer even to God as a character in the story. I take this approach because I am seeking the kind of truth about which Madeleine L'Engle (2002, 86–87) speaks:

from all literature, inaccessible there even where it seems to go, the exasperation of a jealousy that passion carries beyond itself.… It holds desire in suspense, and always saying too much or too little, each time it leaves you without ever going away from you." Apophatic literature, Derrida claims, is literature meant for exile.

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> Truth is demanding. It won't let us sit comfortably. It knocks out our cozy smugness and casual condemnation. It makes us move.… There is no way that you can read the entire Bible seriously and take every word literally.… And that is all right. The Bible is still true. People have always told stories as they searched for truth.

In speaking about Jacob, God, and the others in the Jacob cycle (Gen 25–50) as characters in a story, I look for the deep meaning that the author(s) is attempting to convey. Rather than a threat to our theology or our sense of the veracity of the Bible's claims, narrative criticism is a tool to illumine meaning. Narrative criticism is concerned with the world of the story in its search for truth, which means that it is a tool that naturally raises questions. I foreground my interpretation using this tool because raising questions in the search for the truth is my interest, too. Here, L'Engle (1996, 23) also expresses my own sentiments well: "The minute we begin to think we know all the answers, we forget the questions, and we become smug like the Pharisee who listed all his considerable virtues and thanked God that he was not like other men." I am interested in reengaging the questions this story raises, *as story*. Part of what narrative criticism provides, then, is a sense of who these characters are, spotlighting Jacob's many failures as a moral agent in relation to everyone else in the story world. More importantly, in this case, narrative criticism exposes just how arduous it is to draw a face on Jacob's antagonist. The anonymous nature of Jacob's opponent dovetails into the theological implications of a divine character who pursues and wounds in the dark.

My approach is ethically nuanced, giving attention to the various faces that are put in jeopardy by Jacob in the story world or that are depicted negatively for rhetorical ends. This study is also sociopolitically aware, considering not only the story's poetics but also its rhetoric. The nature of my approach necessitates multiple tools for analysis. Therefore, I use an array of lenses, including deconstruction, psychoanalytic theory, feminist analysis, Levinasian ethics, narratology, and socionarratology. The variety of methods employed in this study correlates to the images/metaphors in the text that I explore—name, face, wound, dark, and crossing. These images/metaphors function as icons, windows that open up the world of the story.

Consequently, a discussion of how images/metaphors function in narrative is critical for grounding my methodology. I, therefore, draw on the work of David Gunn and Danna Fewell, who have noted that the multivalence of

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language creates a "thick" texture, where words can participate simultaneously in more than one pattern. In their words, "Language lures us—allures us—from one word to another, from one meaning of a word to another, from the literal to the metaphorical, from one part of a text into another, from one text to another. The text lures us, and we cast the lure as readers" (Gunn and Fewell 1993, 147). As a result, the connection between text and reader is central. The interface between the face of the reader and the textual face allows for the reification of meaning—and, more importantly, a plurality of meanings. No word or sign is ever in a completely fixed relationship with meaning, what is signified. Meaning is difference, and the meaning of words is in constant deferral (155). This leads naturally to a discussion of the ways in which words are used metaphorically. Drawing on Derrida's first essay to Edmond Jabés, Francis Landy affirms that metaphor is an agent of *différance*, a nonsignifying difference that marks the origin of poetic speech. Metaphor, infinitely equivocal, is the origin of language (Landy 2001, 263). Language is this infinite equivocality that allows a metaphor to exist in a particular time, but also to transcend that time. The images/metaphors in the Jabbok story are rooted in their multiple literary histories (e.g., the retelling by the prophet Hosea; see Hos 12:2–6)—and within the sociopolitical contexts undergirding them, even as they transcend those contexts. Moreover, words—metaphors—make "worlds," as Ellen van Wolde (1994) says. Indeed, Gunn and Fewell (1993, 157) assert, "Whole stories can become metaphors that point to particular ideas or experiences. The telling of a story, the writing of a text, is often an attempt to control—to influence an attitude, to reinforce a worldview, to reconfigure a critical experience."

Within the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian exile and its aftermath is *the* critical experience. This experience is, in one way or another, the central trauma undergirding every major story in the Hebrew Bible. The Jacob cycle generally and the Jabbok text specifically is also a whole story that attempts to remember Israel's tenuous and tumultuous relationship with God, with itself as a nation, and with proximate others. This happens in part through the use of metaphor.

The metaphor of the name, for example, demonstrates a self-awareness on the part of the community producing the text around the character of Jacob. Within the Jacob cycle, he is an ambiguous figure who appears destined from the beginning to supplant his brother (Gen 25:23). His actions are nevertheless censured, to an extent, by Esau, whose tirade centers on the aptness of Jacob's name (Gen 27:36). Some prophetic traditions even use Jacob's name to excoriate the people (e.g., Mic 2:7; Isa 48:1). The name

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therefore becomes a kind of spoken admonition—do not act like *Jacob*. Elsewhere Jacob's name suggests a close relationship to God, where iniquity will be forgiven and fortunes will be restored (e.g., Isa 27:9; Jer 30:18; see Pss 20:1; 24:6; 46:7; 75:9). Likewise, the metaphor of the name also symbolizes other realities—the inscrutability of God, who refuses to reveal his name (Gen 32:29)—and the reality of the nation's self-understanding as one who struggles both with Elohim and *ʾanāšîm* (God and humans; Gen 32:28).

The metaphor of face underscores the anxiety surrounding looking on the divine and living (Exod 33:20), but also the reality that such encounters might nevertheless take place (Gen 16:13; see Deut 34:10). Philologically speaking, the duality/multiplicity of *face* in Hebrew correlates to the many faces that linger at the Jabbok. These include the many iterations of the divine face Jacob encounters throughout the story, which may or may not be the same face he encounters at the Jabbok. Also included in the multiplicity of face are the faces of those who have deceived, have been deceived, or have been discarded throughout the story—Esau, Isaac, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah, and the children. At the Jabbok, and in the face of his opponent, Jacob must face these faces too. The metaphor of the wound symbolizes the central trauma of the Hebrew people—the Babylonian exile—which was believed to be orchestrated by the hand of God (e.g., Hab 1:1–11; Isa 10:5). The wounds in the story, like the names and the faces, are multiple: the psychical wounds sustained by Jacob before arriving at the Jabbok; the invisible wound received by Jacob at the hand of an invisible assailant at the Jabbok; the wounds of Jacob's antagonist, which propel him to pursue, wound, and bless Jacob in the first place; and the wounds of the community telling the story. Closely aligned to the wound is the metaphor of the dark, which functions spatially and temporally to represent the darkness of exile. Jacob's journey is based on a dispersion, an expulsion (Gen 28:10), where he is, more times than not, encountering and bartering with God in the dark (28:20–22; 32:10–13, 22–32) or, likewise, deceiving or being deceived, with darkness as his temporal companion (25:29–34; 27:1–29; 29:21–30). Darkness is embodied in the multiple time spaces of Rebecca's womb and the nocturnal spaces of Bethel and the Jabbok. Finally, the metaphor of the crossing symbolizes all that has taken place to exile Jacob and the nation of Israel from home—and all that must take place to return. Crossing is predicated on expulsion and the deferment of promises made to another patriarch, Abraham (15:12–16). Jacob's crossings are also multiple—he

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must cross the Jabbok itself, he must reconcile with Esau, and he must cross past a divine or divine-human opponent. The metaphors of the name, the face, the wound, the dark, and the crossing function in multiple ways. Metaphor becomes the primary way in which this particular story multiplies meaning.

Each of these metaphors, then, is useful for the interdisciplinary work of this project. They demonstrate not only *how* the text multiplies meaning—but also *why* the text multiples meaning. The metaphors help to underscore the work that the text is doing, namely, the Jabbok encounter is a whole story that represents the ambiguity felt by the Israelite community around its origins, around its relationship to God, and to the experience of exile and return. As Gunn and Fewell (1993, 156) affirm, moving beyond the surface meanings of words into the realm of metaphor allows for multiple meanings, which present the reader with ambiguity. In the Jabbok encounter, ambiguity is a central feature to the story. This is demonstrated by the uncertainty of the identities of the characters and their interrelationship(s). Ambiguity is also demonstrated through the undecidability of the text itself (e.g., who is acting and being acted on), variously described by Roland Barthes (1988, 247) as unmaking, explosion, and dissemination. Nevertheless, this allows for what Gerhard von Rad (1973, 324) calls "inner spaciousness." This inner spaciousness allows not only for a multiplicity of meaning but also for a multiplicity of tellings.

As Derrida and Landy (2001, 265) both state, metaphor is a form of memory, and it is metaphor that "transfers," creating the "possibility of continuity." In this way, the metaphors in the story work to create a past for ancient Yehud, making the present—which is painful and liminal—a habitable space. The Jabbok story is, to borrow a phrase from socionarratologist Arthur Frank (2010, 20), a story for Israel to grow up on. Nevertheless, the story is also adaptable to contemporary readers who see in its metaphors something useful to describe their own lives. Tongue's "multiple canonicities" extends traditional biblical authority (such as poetic, historical, moral, and philological/critical) into the ways in which these canons of authority enact the paradox of both limit and permission in poetic retellings. Contemporary poems such as those by Alden Nowlan, Yehuda Amichai, and Jamie Wasserman all point to an intertextuality that is both affective and culturally adaptable (Tongue 2014, 167; see Nowlan 2013; Amichai 1986; Wasserman 2010). While analysis of these contemporary poems is beyond the scope of this study, these (re)

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tellings do demonstrate the portability of this particular story. The dark encounter between God and Jacob slips textual boundaries and represents fears and desires centering on relational reconciliation. The Jabbok story displaces safe or comfortable pictures of God for pictures that are at best confusing and at worst distressing. The resulting *effect* is *affect*: this is a story that disturbs because it withholds something of God's quiddity[2]—God is the presence of an absence, or an "elusive presence," as Samuel Terrien (2000) says. The elusiveness or ambiguity of this story, its characters, and its meaning(s) will form the basis of an analysis that is both exegetical and meditative.

Journeying through the Jabbok

This study opens with a discussion of the two metaphors that speak to Jacob and Elohim/Ish's identities—name and face. In order to encounter the dark, I discuss the names and faces of the characters who find themselves in that darkness. In the chapter titled "The Name," I use the tools of biblical narrative criticism, specifically borrowing from the insights of poststructuralists such as Derrida (1995b) to explore the names of Jacob, Israel, and Jacob's wrestling partner. The encounter at the Jabbok invites an exploration of the idea of giving, receiving, and saving names. When interpellation occurs around names (personal, political, divine, or geographical), subjects and places are linked in ways that reveal but do not exhaust individual or collective identity (Althusser 2001, 116–18).[3] In particular, in refusing to be named, Jacob's opponent transcends the notion that a name can act as a container for identity. I link Derrida's (1995b) poststructuralist analysis to an interpretation of "The Name" that borders on the *via negativa*. In dealing with Exod 3:1–17 as a critical intertext, I explore the challenges associated with naming God, demonstrating the possibility for escaping a presumed finality to giving/receiving names.

2. By suggesting that in the Jabbok story the character of God may share the same spectrum of good inclinations and evil inclinations as does Jacob, the narrative deconstructs the notion that God's inclinations must always be good.

3. Althusser defines interpellation as a "hailing" that takes place when a subject is cast into a specific mold by the ideological world she inhabits. A subject is thus fixed, locked into the contours of time, space, and characterization that the hailing subject has created. Althusser's concept of interpellation is dealt with in greater detail in chapter 1.

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Chapter 2, "The Face," explores the claim that Jacob sees Elohim face to face and lives (Gen 32:31). Like "The Name," this chapter is also an exploration of the identities of the story's central characters. I draw critically from the feminist analysis of Serge Frolov (2000) to foreground the faces of the women and children in the story. His reading, when coupled with the ethical works of Levinas (1985), exposes Jacob's failures as a moral agent. I engage the many other faces who are sent on ahead of Jacob, potentially into harm's way, but whose presence nevertheless linger at the Jabbok. Here, again I draw on Gen 16:1–21, and its doublet, 21:9–21, as crucial intertexts, to highlight the Janus-faced nature of the divine character, who at once appears both compassionate, elevating the oppressed to agency and subjectivity, and to sanction the well-being of the men he chooses to the detriment of others in the story. God appears behind it all, bringing about his designed plan or purpose, as in the story of Jacob. In particular, the (s)election of Jacob indicates the (dis)election of Esau, as well as the narrative expendability of the women and children. I also show how, at the Jabbok, Jacob is presented with the ethical imperative to answer for all the faces he has put in jeopardy.

In chapter 3, "The Wound," I transition from the identities of the characters to the identities of those telling the story. I argue that the Jabbok encounter is composed by a community of wounded storytellers who discover in Jacob's wound (Gen 32:25–26) a source for their own trauma. As a community who experienced a fracturing of all that was known—family, land, and ritual—Jacob's wound is an invisible symbol of communal pain. Drawing on the socionarratological insights of Frank (1997) and the poststructuralist work of Lacan (1977), I trace the contours of Jacob's wound narratively and sociologically. Narratively, I assert that the Jacob cycle opens with lack—with a desperate man pleading to Yahweh on behalf of his barren wife (Gen 25:21). Lack is central to the events that unfold and for understanding what motivates the characters to act in the ways that they do. I demonstrate that Jacob and Esau are mirrors for all the other lacks. Jacob is wounded, or cut, in the words of Lacan, the moment he discovers himself to be trapped in the discourse of the Other. His alienation, however, ironically leads him toward subjectivity. I also contend that at the Jabbok, both Jacob and his wrestling partner experience a mutual vulnerability. Moreover, whatever else may be said about Jacob's opponent, at the Jabbok he demonstrates a profound relationality. His desire renders him vulnerable to Jacob, whom he pursues, wounds, and blesses. Finally, I suggest that Jacob's wound and limp are the excess or trace of trauma that

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never goes away. The excess of Jacob's wound indicates that Israel's story is both about the chaos of communal disintegration and about the quest to wrestle honestly and to make meaning out of suffering. Their grasp on life, on the land, on God, is tenuous, and always already wounded and wounding. The wound is already there before the story is (re)told—a story with an invisible assailant and an invisible wound. The story remains, like Jacob's wound, half-open.

Chapter 4, "The Dark," moves beyond questions of identity and identity politics to a discussion of temporality and space. I trace the many images of darkness in the Jacob cycle and in the Jabbok text. The darkness of Rebekah's womb is a space where Jacob and Esau's bodies and stories are kept, as well as a temporal period of gestation (Gen 25:19–26). The dark of the night, at both Bethel (28:10–22) and the Jabbok (32:22–32), is where Jacob encounters a divine being or beings. Finally, the darkness covers Isaac's aged eyes, blurring his vision and enabling Jacob and Rebekah's deception (27:1–29). In this chapter, I draw on the theopoetic writings of Catherine Keller (2003) to destabilize a wholly negative interpretation of darkness and to situate it theologically. I also utilize Mikhail Bakhtin's (1990) concept of the chronotope to argue that the dark authors and is authored by those who inhabit it, traverse it, and sojourn in it. In so doing, human and divine agency function alongside the dark in order to form identity. What follows is a discussion of the darkness in the divine figure that Jacob encounters, drawing on Derrida's (1995a) concept of trembling and the *kryptō*. This metaphor of the dark, like all the others, is not merely about the story world of the Jabbok scene but is also an expression of the darkness of the Babylonian exile.

In my final chapter, "The Crossing," I argue that the crossing of the Jabbok River functions on three levels: the spatial, the human, and the divine (Gen 32:23–24). Rebekah's womb functions as the threshold that must first be crossed. The oracle at the boys' birth attests that the struggle between Jacob and Esau will extend to their ancestors (25:21–26). I explore multiple citations within the Hebrew Bible (Num 20:14–21; Ps 137; Lam 4:21–22; Mal 1:2–3a, 4a; Obadiah) that demonstrate the complex and protracted relationship between the Israelites and the Edomites. This literature attests to the reification of boundaries crossed by Jacob and Esau. Jacob's interactions with Esau—and also with Laban—reveal a text that delights in trickster antics amid the real struggle for resources and power. I bring collective-memory studies into conversation with the socionarratological insights of Heather McKay (1987), arguing that the Jabbok encounter is in

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part a story about a displaced person transitioning from home and back again. Here, too, the story represents the fears and needs of the postexilic community of Yehud.

In conclusion, this study has implications for the Jacob cycle as well as for the ancient community of Yehud. The Jabbok encounter remembers a past that is, at every literary moment, punctuated with a question mark. From the end of Deuteronomy, where the people stand on a precipice and wonder whether they will take hold of the promises made to them so long ago, to the end of Israel's primary history, where monarchy fails and land is lost, the children of Israel's (hi)story represent the partial fulfillment of deferred promises. The story is about exile, about wandering in wilderness and in darkness and asking, "How long?" The Jabbok encounter is about a melancholy search for home for a community grappling with its identity, with its relationship to God, and to the land. The Jabbok encounter encapsulates each of these fears and anxieties. The encounter demonstrates that blessing may not turn out the way they envision it and that blessing is frequently ambiguous and complex. Beyond Yehud, the Jabbok encounter testifies to the power of stories not only to represent worlds but to continue to create them. To tell and to read stories is to engage in a decidedly human endeavor, one with implications for how individuals live and move and have their being in the world. The characters of Jacob and God are, like those of us who read and write about them, complex and surprising. Their names, their faces, their wounds—the darkness they inhabit and the spaces they cross over—are always already ambiguous and multiple. The multiplicity of meaning, the multiple spaces they occupy, make their story compelling and allow us to find our place in it. The story's inner spaciousness creates space for us, too.

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