

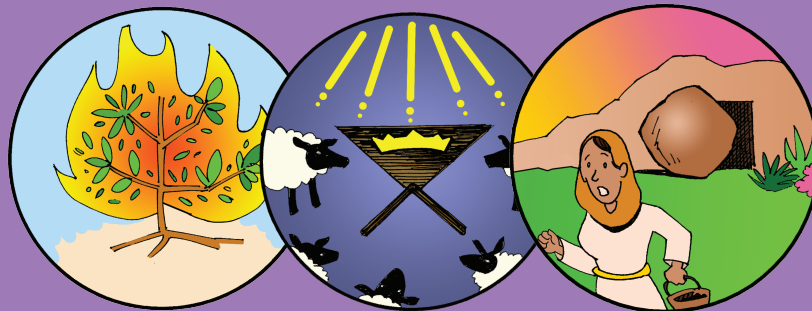
**CONTEXT &
CONNECTIONS**

**RESOURCE
#2-3**

**SAMPLE
DISPLAY COPY**

LIVING THE WORD

Narrative Lectionary



Context & Connections

Background Notes

Contributors

Publisher

Gregory Rawn

Editors

Gregory Rawn
Elaine Seekon

Layout

Nance Keyes

Writers

Rev. Ed Strietelmeier
Joshua Warfield
Stephanie Luedtke
Rev. Eric Luedtke

Copyrights

Living the Word: Contexts & Connections (Narrative Lectionary, Year 2)
Text copyright © 2018-2019 by Spirit & Truth Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this resource may be used or reproduced in any other manner whatsoever without written permission. For information, contact Spirit & Truth Publishing at www.SpiritAndTruthPublishing.com.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Disclaimer

For your convenience, *Living the Word: Contexts & Connections* provides hyperlinks and Internet searching suggestions that point to a diverse assortment of websites not under the control of Spirit & Truth Publishing. We have no control over the nature, content, and availability of these websites, and the inclusion of these links does not necessarily imply a complete recommendation or endorsement of the entire content or views expressed within them. As with all things, please judge linked websites and content in accordance with your own theological and biblical standards.



Jacob Wrestles

God Creates Family

The Point

God changes us.

Key Verse

Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

- Genesis 32:28

Summary

On a journey to reunite with his estranged brother, Jacob encounters an unknown man. The two wrestle and Jacob is injured. Before the man leaves, Jacob demands a blessing and receives one along with a new name: Israel.

Accompanying Text

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”

- Mark 14:32-36

Contexts

Linguistics

- There is an idiomatic play on words using the word face (Heb. *pānim*) in verse 20.
 - ♦ The phrase “I may appease him” (Heb. *'akapperāh pānāw*) literally translates to “I will appease before his face.”
 - ♦ This theme continues with “I shall see his face.”
 - ♦ This is followed by “perhaps he will accept me” (Heb. *'ūlay yissā pānāy*), better translated as “perhaps he will accept my face.”
 - ♦ The continual use of “face” connects this portion of the story to what follows, when Jacob proclaims in verse 30 “I have seen God face to face.” For more information, see **Geography/Setting**.¹
- In the NRSV notes, the name Israel (Heb. *yisrā'ēl*) is said to mean “The one who strives with God” or “God strives;” however, it also can be understood as “May God persevere.”²
- In verse 30, the word translated as God is the frequently used Hebrew word for God *'ēlohām*. Though it frequently is used for the God of Israel, the word is also used often in the Hebrew Bible more generally for lords or even divine beings. This feeds into the question of who the mysterious stranger is. For more information, see **Culture/Religion**.³

Geography/Setting

- Today's story takes place at Penuel. Penuel, also spelled Peniel (both spellings are in today's lesson), means "face of God." This is the location where Jacob wrestles with the mysterious stranger, and this story serves as an etymological origin for the name of the city. The ancient city was located east of the Jordan River.⁴

History

- While it is unknown when the story was initially composed, Genesis (and the Torah, or first five books of the Bible, as a whole) was likely compiled in the sixth century BCE during or following the Babylon exile, with many stories based on earlier oral traditions.⁵
- Within the context of Jacob's story (often referred to as the Jacob Cycle), this event is a pivotal moment. At this point in the story, Jacob has tricked both his brother Esau and his father Isaac into giving him Esau's birthright (Genesis 27). This greatly angered Esau, causing Jacob to flee to Haran. While in Haran, Jacob works for his uncle, Laban, and eventually marries two of Laban's daughters (Genesis 29-30). Eventually, God came to Jacob in a dream and instructed Jacob to return to Canaan (Genesis 31). It is here that today's story begins, with Jacob nervous about meeting his estranged brother Esau for the first time after Jacob had left home.

Culture/Religion

- The identity of the man with whom Jacob wrestles is unknown. Oddly, the narration does not identify the stranger at all, particularly if the stranger was meant to be understood as God. The connection of the stranger to God comes from the man's proclamation that Jacob had "striven with God... and prevailed" (verse 28), Jacob's subsequent renaming to Israel, and Jacob's own remark that he has "seen God face to face" for which Penuel is named. However, Hosea 12:3-4 and the Wisdom of Solomon 10:10-12 interpret the stranger as an angel of God and various other interpretations have been provided throughout history, including that the stranger is Esau, a demon, or another evil spirit. The story follows a standard pattern (see **Literature/Genre**) that further complicates the identity of the stranger.⁶
- Regardless of the identity of the man, it is clear that the struggle is part of God's plan for Jacob. Jacob's name is changed to Israel and this name will become the name of an entire nation. This solidifies Jacob's claim on the birthright through which God's covenant with Abraham (Jacob's grandfather) will be realized.⁷

Literature/Genre

- Today's story combines etiological (origin story) elements with a historical narrative account of Jacob's life. The etiological portion shows the origin of the people of Israel in the person of Jacob, who is renamed Israel. This renaming provides an etymology for the nation of Israel's name. It also provides the origin of a religious ritual of avoiding the meat from the thigh muscle (Genesis 32:32).⁸
- The encounter between Jacob and his adversary follows a common ancient Near East story structure wherein the protagonist is given a divine quest (Jacob is instructed to return to Canaan), the protagonist encounters an unexpected divine adversary whose task is to prevent the protagonist from achieving their goal (Jacob wrestles with the man), and then the protagonist prevails.⁹
- This story structure combined with the lack of identity of the man suggests that this story originally featured an opposing divine antagonist other than God, such as a Canaanite deity. This reference may have been removed by one of the authors of Genesis to highlight the belief that the God of Israel is the one and only true God.¹⁰

Authorial Intention/Occasion

- This story is meant to build the identity of Israel as a people in the Babylonian exile and following. By showing the origin of their nation's namesake, it provided identity and community. All the people of Israel were descended from Jacob, uniting them as a single family. His name change to Israel means "the one who strives with God." This name also was part of the Israelite identity as a nation who strives and wrestles with God (in fact, this is one of the themes of Unit 2). The story ultimately provides hope as Jacob is blessed by God. For a nation living in exile, the story provides them with hope in their future, too.¹¹

Audience

- The intended audience was likely the people of Israel in exile in Babylon or shortly after the exile. Because of this context, the Torah deals with the origins of the people of Israel, their relationship to God and the world, and is meant to provide hope and explanation within the context of exile. This all helped to build their identity as a people.¹²

Common Misunderstandings

- As stated above in **Culture/Religion**, the identity of the adversary who wrestles with Jacob is unknown. While the text is unclear, many have interpreted him to be God or an angel of God.¹³

More Information

- Hebrew Bible scholar Wilda Gafney provides a commentary on today's lesson that includes an overview of Jacob's and Esau's feud. It can be found by clicking the following link or searching for Wilda (Wil) Gafney on the Working Preacher website: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=988.

Connections

Narrative Lectionary Connections

- **Last Week (Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7)** – Last week, God appeared in the form of three strangers and promised to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child. A year later, their son was born, and they named him Isaac. Isaac would become the father of Jacob and Esau, and the covenant God made with Abraham is passed on to Jacob.
- **Next Week (Exodus 1:8-14 [15—2:10]; 3:1-15)** – Next week, the story picks up 400 years later as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the Israelites—are enslaved in Egypt. God comes to Moses in the form of a burning bush and sends Moses to deliver God’s people from slavery.
- **Other Year 2 Connections** – There are several connections on the themes of blessing and sending. The people of Israel are sent home after 70 years in exile in Ezra 1 and 3 (12/15/2019). The disciples are instructed to proclaim the good news and provide healing in Mark 6 (2/9/2020). The disciples are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 (4/19/2020).

Other Bible Connections

- Hosea 12:2-6 references the story of Jacob, including his wrestling with the stranger.
- Wrestling with the divine happens a few times in the Bible, even if it is only figuratively. For instance, Abraham spars with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:16-33. Additionally, Moses argues with God over the fate of Israel in Exodus 32:9-14.

Thematic Connections

- **Annual Theme: Living out God’s Kingdom** – It is not always easy living out God’s kingdom. Just as Jacob wrestled with his fear and with God, we wrestle with our own fears and doubts. Sometimes we even wrestle with where God is calling us to go or what God has in plan for us. Jacob is forever changed by his encounter with God, and we are changed, too.
- **Unit Theme: God Creates Family** – Today’s story is about a broken family that God is working to reunite. Jacob’s new name, Israel, will become the name of an entire nation of people, all descended from his family.

Liturgical/Seasonal Connections

- By now, the school year and church programming year have likely been running for a few weeks, which means that new routines or a return to old routines may have fallen into place. Jacob’s story shows that when God shows up, the unexpected always happens. As we fall into routines for the school year, this story can serve as a good reminder to leave room for the unexpected movement of the Spirit.

Hymns/Music

- There are many hymns that deal with encountering God, including: “Here I Am, Lord,” “Here, O Lord, I See Thee Face to Face,” “Blessed Be the Tie that Binds,” “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown,” “Lord, I Cannot Let Thee Go,” “I Bring to Thee, My Savior,” and “Seek Ye First.”
- Some praise songs that deal with meeting God include “Face to Face” by Marc Byrd, “I Will Never Be the Same Again” by Geoff Bullock, “Bless Me Indeed” by Bart Millard, and “Jacob and Sons” from *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Media Connections

- The aforementioned song “Jacob and Sons” from Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat* is a fun introduction to Jacob’s life following this encounter. There are several cast recordings that can be found by searching for the title of the musical on your favorite audio provider, or you can click on this link for a video recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtpzoGj-1V8>.
- There are many famous depictions of Jacob’s encounter with the stranger, including works by Rembrandt, Delacroix, and Gauguin. Two more recent depictions include Hananiah Harari’s *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1936), which can be viewed here <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/jacob-wrestling-angel-9936> and Jacob Epstein’s *Jacob and the Angel* (1941), which can be viewed here: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/epstein-jacob-and-the-angel-t07139>.

¹ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 253-255.

² *Ibid.*, 255.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Revised Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 827-827.

⁵ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 35.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 266-267.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 266-269.

⁹ Brueggemann, 266-267.

¹⁰ James L. Mays, *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, Revised Edition (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 103.

¹¹ Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible: A Reader’s Guide and Reference*, 6th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 110-114.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Brueggemann, 266-269.