

## *Sacred Space in Promise: The Patriarchal Period – Jacob’s Return to Canaan*

### **C. Jacob’s Return**

Jacob served Laban faithfully for twenty years, and, though Laban sought to exploit and defraud him, the Lord was with Jacob and blessed him at every turn (30:25-31:42). Now, having triumphed in his exile, *it was time for the covenant seed to return to the land of promise. Bethel* was Jacob’s first great encounter with God, and *Mahanaim/Peniel* was the second. The context for this episode was Jacob’s impending reunion with his estranged brother Esau.

#### **Mahanaim**

1. Mahanaim means *two camps*, and it expresses a profound irony that was crucial to the development of Jacob’s relationship with God and the changing of his name to *Israel*.
  - a. First, Mahanaim spoke of Jacob’s decision to split his company into two camps as an anxious, self-initiated strategy to protect them from the threat he anticipated from Esau.
  - b. But it also spoke of God’s presence with Jacob in his camp; it was a dual encampment.
2. Mahanaim speaks of dual camps, and such existed as well within Jacob’s conflicted mind: *He set about securing his own encampment, even while acknowledging that place as God’s camp and petitioning Him in view of His oath to him at Bethel.* \* ref. 32:1-12, 22-23
3. This theme of *dual camps* played out repeatedly in Israel’s history, as Mahanaim was the site of Ish-bosheth’s coronation (2 Sam. 2:8-10), David’s encampment as he fled from Absalom (2 Sam. 17), and the place where Jeroboam I built his second great city (1 Kings 12:25).

#### **Peniel**

1. Jacob cried out to God for protection, and He answered his plea with a strange hand-to-hand struggle that left the patriarch lame, but also triumphant with a new name: *Israel*.
  - a. The word *Israel* has two possible meanings: *God prevails, or he prevails with God*.
  - b. Both meanings are indicated here, for Jacob prevailed in his struggle with God (32:28), *but in a completely incapacitated condition.* \* 32:25
2. Though Jacob wrestled with a *man* (32:24), it’s clear that he viewed this individual as representing Yahweh and His power and intent toward him.
  - a. This “man” had the power to dislocate his hip by simply touching it, and this provoked Jacob to insist on obtaining his *blessing*. \* 32:26
  - b. So also this person identified himself with God and assumed the authority to change Jacob’s name to *Israel*. \* 32:27-28
  - c. Jacob then asked him to identify himself, which it seems he refused to do. Nevertheless, Jacob discerned his identity, naming that place *Peniel*: “face of God.” \* 32:29-30
3. Hosea’s reference to this episode (12:3-5) adds further insight to it and its significance.

- a. Jacob's plea that God bless him is often seen as a demand born of pride and selfish presumption, but Hosea indicates otherwise: *Jacob sought the Lord's blessing "with tears." His plea was an act of tearful supplication in weakness and dependence.*
- b. Jacob did not fight and overcome God; rather, he fervently implored God's blessing and would not "let go" of Him until he had obtained it. The result was that he named the place *Peniel* ("face of God") and God named him *Israel*: *Jacob had experienced an encounter that showed him his God in a profound way – he had "seen His face," and he'd prevailed to obtain His blessing because God had given him this favor and triumph.*

## **Bethel**

1. Upon his return to Canaan, Jacob settled with his family at Shechem and built an altar there (33:18-20). (Note that Shechem was the site of Abraham's first altar; ref. 12:4-7.)
2. But God intended for Jacob to return to the place where he had issued his oath, and this meant continuing beyond Shechem to Bethel. \* cf. 28:20-22, 31:3, 13, 35:1
3. The tragic, covenant-threatening events at Shechem (34:1-31) underscored that Jacob's exile wasn't to end there. Even more, those events served a prophetic purpose as they anticipated Israel's future inheritance of Canaan and the challenges it would pose to the covenant household: *Shechem and the episode there portrayed the danger and covenant compromise of close relations with the Canaanite people. So Israel (Jacob) instructed all who were with him to abandon their idols and consecrate themselves as they departed for Bethel (35:1-4), presaging Israel's obligation when they later entered and took possession of Canaan.*
4. Thus Jacob returned to Bethel, thereby bringing his journey full-circle and proving out the mutual oaths made there two decades earlier.
  - a. God had kept His promise to the covenant heir, causing him to prevail through great struggle (ref. 35:5), thus showing Himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, *and* Jacob.
  - b. Jacob had become *Israel*, learning during his exile what it means to triumph and flourish through embracing and serving his covenant God in trusting, dependent faith.
5. And so Israel's return to Bethel saw both covenant parties reiterating their covenant commitment to one another – *God in reiterated oath and Israel in reenactment.* \* 35:6-15

## **Conclusions:**

1. Jacob's prayer highlights the covenant context of this episode and points to its significance; this is the lens through which *Mahanaim* and *Peniel* must be interpreted and understood.
2. *Mahanaim* reflected Jacob's fear and self-remedy – his faithlessness within the covenant, even as that was juxtaposed with God's covenant oath to him and presence with him.
3. Jacob was now *Israel*, but as he'd experienced *Peniel*. He had contended with "God and men" and prevailed – not by his own strength, but in abject weakness and dependence on the favor and power of his covenant God. *So it would be with the covenant nation descended from him, and so it would be with Israel's true embodiment – the singular seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He, too, would grapple with God and men and emerge triumphant.*