

You are Israel: Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob's new name is not just for him.

by [J. Mary Luti](#) in the [October 7, 1998](#) issue

Devout Christians often appropriate the Bible's language and patterns to frame their spiritual experiences. When feeling dry or abandoned, we speak of exile or desert sojourns. Prodded to an unknown destination, we invoke the memory of a wandering Aramaean. After long vigils, when we finally *know*, we say we've heard a still, small voice. Summoned by a Presence, we talk of Moses and a burning bush. All alone, with dreams of swindled brothers hampering sleep, or when God commands us first to go and then obstructs the way, or in a limping morning sharp with extra light, we speak of wrestling with an angel, of blessings, of brand new names.

This is a good way of taking intimate possession of scripture, but it is not hazard-free. When we use the Bible's stories like shorthand for the movements of our souls, we sometimes also narrow their concerns and tame their provocations. Once, for instance, during a Bible study, a successful man confided that he was experiencing Job's despair. Group members braced themselves for the worst. It turned out that the town's most sought-after preschool had rejected his toddler's application. Although the man was upset, he should have kept Job's name out of it.

Thankfully, most people are not so self-involved. And, in the end, the particular way each of us domesticates the Bible to fit our inner lives isn't the biggest issue. What's important is that scripture is not meant primarily to fit or foster individual inner lives--not in the modern sense, anyway. It is meant first for shaping, celebrating, instructing, warning and vexing the life of a *people*, a community chosen to show God's glory to the world. To be sure, individuals are commanded to cultivate the holiness breathing in scripture; but that striving takes place in a context larger, longer, more diverse and more vital than the small precinct of a private soul. "Alone to the Alone" is gibberish to the Bible. Its witness is finally corporate, its stories "mine" because its people are.

In an age of self-referent individualism, it's not often that we get a chance to enter the evocative amplitude of a communal sensibility, that time-confounding solidarity our biblical ancestors presupposed. A friend of mine who teaches world cultures in junior high recently did. His class was studying ways in which personal, familial and communal memories create identity and belonging. In one exercise, he asked students to share their earliest recollection. The answers came as you might expect--my dog, riding a pony, my mom, the cottage at the lake. But then it was the Jewish kid's turn. Without pausing, Mark Shapiro said, "Abraham." Angels descending sucked air from the room. Had 12 other kids not been yelling, "Abraham who?," the teacher would have cast himself in terror to the floor. As it was, he hardly breathed. Who knew little Mark was part of a *people*?

When the authors of Genesis shaped the story of Jacob at Penuel, they did so in part to account for the new name the patriarch received after besting God in combat. "Your name is not Jacob any longer; *you are Israel*, for you fought with God and humans and prevailed." Jacob's new name was not just for him. Claimed by his children and their children, it became the spacious name of a chosen people, and Jacob became a "corporate personality."

Thus, as later scriptures attest, Jacob's contentiousness is Israel's stormy history with Yahweh. His refusal to let God go is the people clinging to the covenant. God's blessing is their very existence. However personal it was--intimate, mysterious, life-changing--God's ambush of Jacob at Jabbok was not a private experience. It was also to be his people's; or, as one scholar puts it, such stories of the past were "about *them* in an earlier embodiment." You are Israel, God said to Jacob; and we are too.

When Jacob reached the river and sent everything he had across ahead of him, we were there too--alone, stripped, agile, ready for anything, and desperately afraid. When a man appeared and fought with him all night, we felt the sweaty grasp of a God mortally engaged, both enemy and friend. And when he hit Jacob with a cheap shot, we too went slack, wounded as much by all our old treacheries as by our going to the mat with God. When Jacob gained the upper hand and the blessing, we prevailed with him, but it was not a victory; we still knew nothing of God's name. We were lucky just to have survived. And when the sun came up on Jacob and he realized that the face most to be feared was not his brother's but God's, we too marveled that the worst that could ever happen was over; relieved, we crossed the river to Esau, dragging our leg like a prize.

And now we know--because we were there and it happened to us--that God does not despise us for our supplanting and deceit, but forever ambushes our lives with new chances; that God does not renege on promises made even under duress; that God may slip away at daybreak, but never abandons us; that God can render us vulnerable to all our fast-approaching Esaus, the siblings we robbed of birthrights with whom we must make peace; that the gracious reunion of sinners and sinned-against is the blessing of God.

You are Israel. How our narrowed hearts expand at this announcement! What a long memory we acquire, what panoramas open, what a knowing hope presides over our lives! What deep water we waded in! What a great and rambling house we live in, with our father, ancient Abraham; with Christ, the first-born brother; with mothers and sisters of every faithless, faithful age.