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Luke E. Ugwueye
Religion & Human Relations
Faculty of Arts Nnamdi
Azikiwe University, Awka,
Nigeria

Alex A. Ihemekwala
Religion & Human Relations
Faculty of Arts Nnamdi
Azikiwe University, Awka,
Nigeria

Correspondence:
Luke E. Ugwueye
Religion & Human Relations
Faculty of Arts Nnamdi
Azikiwe University, Awka,
Nigeria

Aetiology in the Service of Old Testament Literature: A Study of Jacoban Narrative in Gen. 32

Luke E. Ugwueye, Alex A. Ihemekwala

Abstract

Old Testament criticism has grown to see literature as a veritable mediating channel of Hebrew historical documentation. Literature, obviously carries with it history and hope of a people. Among many genres of literature evident in the Hebrew Scripture is aetiology, sometimes rendered as 'etiology'. It is the study of cause, set of causes or manner of causation and origination. Traces of origins encompassing history and mythical explanations are seen here and there in the Hebrew Scripture. Here literary dynamics employed the services of aetiology to untie the mysterious events of the past to articulate the enigmatic interactions between divinity and humanity. Aetiological genres in the Hebrew Bible are demonstrated through myth, legend, cult, saga and theophanies. They immensely add to the rich colouration of the literature of the scripture. Jacoban narrative in Genesis 32 is used in this paper to demonstrate these roles of aetiology in the Hebrew sacred writ. The work posits that the essence of religious literature could be truncated when rationality and sentimentality are confused or mingled with Spirituality in the explanation of aetiological passages without applying aetiological gizmo of reading. The aetiology of this passage, like any other religious literature, elicits from its readers constructive transformation that originates and flows directly from God for the endless burgeoning of enduring moral values for rebuilding our relationships and the entire society.

Keywords: Aetiology, service, Old Testament, narrative and literature

Introduction

Many readers of the Hebrew Bible have interpreted the Jacoban narrative in Genesis 32 as a direct command for the adherents of the Jewish-rooted-faiths, especially the Christian religion, to be willing to change their names just the same way Jacob did in the passage, should the need arise. African Christians, whose names are intrinsically associated with their traditional backgrounds, believe that their native names ought to be changed in favour of Hebraic-Christian names. Traditional names, for this group, are derived from names connected with the different trado-cultural deities and customs that held sway before the advent of Christianity, and therefore adjudged demonic in meaning and origin.

This development has jeopardised some age long mutual peace experienced in some communities where names of individuals and towns have been changed arbitrarily by overzealous Christians in the guise of religiosity. The Jacoban narrative in Genesis 32 has always been used by the Christians as a basis for this change. However the narrative in this passage is an aetiological literary genre used by the authors of the passage to, among other things, give reasons or explain how the name 'Israel' originated.

Aetiology is a carefully articulated explanation of the origin or change of name, event, tradition or any phenomenon with the framework of an illustrative narrative. Change of names for religious reason, through conviction after conversion from one faith to another, is not absurd considering the understanding and the significance of baptism in the practice of religion. To get converted to a new religion implies transformation of behaviour and may usually bring forth a change of name of the character being converted. Ugwueye (2004) enunciates that in Hebrew religious mind, for instance, a person is not known unless his name is known. To have no name is to have no existence in reality. In the Old Testament, a name is always more than a conventional sign; it expresses character or history, hence a change in either respect frequently gives rise to a change in name. As such when the support

of Biblical references is sort, then care should be taken not to interpret such passages out of context. The use of literary genres by authors and editors in passing their messages and intentions is obvious in Old Testament narratives. Many of the authors most often, just as we are today, were far removed from the events they reported in terms of historical taxonomy. Lindemans (1999) said that reading through the Scripture, especially the Pentateuch where the passage belongs, one notices random display of literary forms known as genres in their regular patterns. Literary genres are simply classes, forms or styles into which literary works could be categorized for preservation and presentation.

The narrative in Genesis 32 in every perceivable ramification belongs to the aetiology genre used by redactors in the service of creative writing. The Hebrew scripture is a basic literary reality comprised of records of Jewish traditions, culture and religion. The approach to this text as literature today still sends negative signals down the faith spines of many Christian readers in this part of the globe. Preachers and their followers are instead used to spiritual interpretation of the passage as if it is a direct divine injunction and advocacy for changing of names. This is done while turning a blind eye to the intention behind the narrative, thereby diminishing the aetiological and theological beauty of the text. This is a precarious disposition for the sustained significance of this passage as the word of God both now and to the future generations.

When passages are arbitrarily interpreted, they only serve momentary emotional and spiritual help which could ricochet when the chips are down. This study therefore, uses the aetiological approach in the passage to read the narrative for enhanced understanding. The study provides aetiological interpretive platform upon which change of names could be based in strict connection with God's covenant promise and its realisation and re-enactments in our lives and character through the divine cum human symbolic instruments of 'Jacob and Israel' - the dramatis personae in the passage.

Aetiology in the service of Old Testament literature

The flowering and floundering of the Old Testament theology as described by Martens (1997), in the last two hundred years and especially in the twentieth century is an obvious fact in the critical development of Biblical studies. Yet the beauty of aetiological narrative genre which dominates the pentateuchal Old Testament is relatively under-appreciated in the entire enterprise. Aetiology is the epicentre of the dynamism surrounding the Old Testament narratives, mainly the Torah as exemplified in Genesis 32 which as a single passage contains about four aetiological expressions.

Narrative is the commonest type of script that occupies about forty per cent of the Old Testament writings. A narrative is simply a long story, preserved in written or oral form used as a vehicle to convey and concretize ideas that influence faith and life of a people. Kirkpatrick (2007) added that it could also be seen as an accompaniment to filmed, acted or written events to connect them. Narratives are transverse and cross-disciplinary phenomena found in all forms of human creativity and arts. It is used in various styles to guide behaviour, transmit and shape cultural history as well as formation of communal identity and values. The passage under study is part of the authors'

choice of communicative narrative evident in the patriarchal complex. Coogan (2012) said that narrative with its inbuilt aetiological ingredients may be taken, then, as a substantial hypothesis to be understood as literary creative writing, not only in the primary construction of the individual narrative segments but in the development of the larger complex tales of the patriarchal tradition.

The beauty of the use of aetiological genre in the Scripture is that it has different sides such as legend, saga, theophanies, mythical and cultic presentations. Alter (2011) opines that meaning cannot be arrived at without taking into account all the characteristics of a text - sounds, onomatopoeia, catchwords, and in short all the aesthetic functions of language that are employed to convey meaning in a story. The appreciation of the beauty of aetiology as a literary genre adds glamour to the understanding of Jacob's narrative. Murphy (2011) argues that the act of not recognizing the literary genre of a passage before interpretation is a form of reductionism which hinders the essence of a religious literature that is as rich as the Hebrew scripture. In order to make a healthier sense out of the text he concluded that one must read the Pentateuch with an awareness of the various aetiological literary forms that are contained within it.

Jacob's story in Genesis 32 when placed on the prism of aetiology offer a better meaning than mere plain interpretation. The phrase 'a man wrestled with him (Jacob)' (אִישׁ נִיאָבֵק עִמוֹ) prepares the way for the introduction of the angel of the covenant that was to transform him. After the transformation the passage says 'your name shall be called no more Jacob (יַעֲקֹב) but Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל)'. The change from 'supplanter' (Jacob) to the 'one who contends with God' (Israel) provides an aetiology of the connectedness between what his nature was in the past and to the more enduring nature and task of the realisation of the promise for Israel and the future of mankind.

Most pentateuchal narratives are likely to be interpreted out of context without first recognising and or identifying the literary genre where they belong. Literature here is more than mere poems, novels and plays in verses and prose. According to Ihemekwala (2017) Jewish scholars used different types of literature to develop, preserve and transmit their religious and cultural heritage and made frantic efforts to give them historical footing. Marten (1992) recognizes all the aspects, forms and styles of writing as the post-modern main stay of "new literary criticism". The fascination with narrative, metaphor, aetiology and symbol has been fuelled through the writings of scholars like Hans Wilhelm Frei (1922 - 1988), Paul Ricoeur (1913 - 2005) and Philip Wheelwright (1901 - 1970). Commenting on the recognition of different literary styles of a passage in relation with other critical tools for better interpretation, Okwueze (2008) maintains that the principal value of historical and literary criticism of the Old Testament is the success of that method in revealing the organic relationship between history of Israel and the literature proper.

However, he observes that one of the major problems of Old Testament interpretation lies in the difficult nature of its literature which manifests diverse and variegated literary outfits, hence the belief that the Bible is theologically intended rather than precisely a historical masterpiece in the scientific sense of the term. The Bible is designed to be a book of religion rather than history. The questions

associated with the literature of the Old Testament are obviously innumerable, and every literary product has a history; the older the literary product, the more complex the history. The relevance of the Old Testament literature is harnessed more through the approach with which the reader comes to it, hence the clarification of the relationship between history and literature is one great achievement recorded by Biblical criticism. Alter (2011) understands that “Historical questions put to text yield history; literary questions put to the text yield literature; but both yield meaning. There is no reason to put one against the other; they are in fact complementary. And they are both necessary for a theological interpretation of the religious literature that is the Torah” (p.6).

To understand, interpret and appreciate the beauty of narratives it must be placed on a literary platform for critical diagnosis. It is only then that literary genres like aetiology will be recognised in its service of literature. Alter further said that “When one is dealing with a text so bare of embellishment and explicit commentary, one must be constantly aware of the feature through which one part of the text provides oblique commentary on another” (p.21). Jacob’s stories in the entire book of Genesis are mainly aetiological in nature.

Aetiology in the Service of Literature in Genesis 32

As said before aetiological motifs do occur in general in the Bible, especially in Genesis which explains the beginning of many things (Ross, 1983). Genesis 32 is a unit of the patriarchal complex, and houses four major aetiological expressions that aid Old Testament literature. The four aetiologies are: The episode at Mahanai’m (מַחֲנַיִם) (Gen. 32:2); Crossing the ford of Jabbok (יַבְבֹּק) with the origin and explanation of the name Israel (Gen. 32:22); the theophany and origin of Penu’el (פְּנֹֻֿעַל) (Gen. 32:30) and the explanation of the origin of a Jewish dietary law (Gen. 32: 32). These aetiologies are the explanations for the town of Mahanai’m (two camps) which lies east of the Jordan; the explanation for the origin of the name Israel; the reason for the name Penuel/Peniel; and the reason for the establishment of the food taboo that forbids Israelites from eating the sinew of animals.

Murphy (2011) sees this narrative as an adventure that began and ended with theophanies. Theophany is an ambit of aetiology that offers a literary platform or bridge for the explanation of the mystery of divinity meeting with humanity without detrimental frictions. Aetiology in the field of literature is a deliberate and systematic attempt to explain the origins of some customs, traditions or cultural institutions, historical monuments or natural phenomena. Emphasising the role of aetiology in literary narratives Lindesman (1999) said,

An aetiological narrative offers a mythic explanation for the origin of something as opposed to a historical or scientific explanation and thus frees an individual or culture from defining something in strictly historical or scientific terms. In other words, an aetiological narrative gives reign to poetry, dream states, imagination, and associative creativity. It is the language of origins liberated from the constraint of history and science (p.4).

Jacob’s encounter with divinity at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-22 is replicated in Genesis 35:9-15, and revamped at Penu’el in Genesis 32:23-25. The two aetiological cycles are reconciled at the meeting with Esau in Genesis 32:4-22;

33:1-17. The narrative is summed in chapters 34-36 with the ancestral data of Jacob’s family and the generation (תולדות) of Esau (Edomites). This trace of ancestry is part of the historical worth of aetiology, though the major Jewish history is contained and preserved further in the book of Kings than in the past memories preserved in the patriarchal narratives. Mark (1984) posits that the patriarchal stories combine historical fact, tradition, poetry, and symbolism. Their value lie not so much in the bits of historical information they disclose but in the credible insights they give in clothed historical garbs.

The history of the Jews and Africans are contained in their tales and folklores, especially when origins are involved. Karmode and Alter (2011) argue that the Hebrew Bible, though it includes some of the most extraordinary styles of narratives and poems in the Western Literary tradition, reminds us that literature is not entirely limited to story and poem, that the coldest catalogue and the driest aetiology may be an affective subsidiary instrument of literary expression. The role of aetiology in literary expressions in the entire passage of Genesis 32 is significant. According to Schrein (2007), the author’s intention, the genres, literary forms, and the literary techniques used are essential to understanding the type of literature one is reading and the role such a literary piece is performing.

The choice of aetiological genre by the narrator of Genesis 32 does not undermine the significance of the story nor the truth which the Bible conveys; rather it adds strength to its credibility, so long as its aetiology is not seen as either a guarantee to interpret the tale out of relevance as a mere story, or unilaterally isolated as a yardstick for arbitrary change of name. This provides the solution to the indefinite tension created by Barton (1996) who posits that the passage is of post-structuralist perspective with irreconcilable ambiguity and indeterminacy.

It is true that Genesis 32 narrative is aetiological; it contains historical elements that have no other means of explanation than to accept them as they are presented by the editors. For example, the theophany at Penu’el might have been an old folklore on the existence of spirit beings around geographical boundaries and rivers. Mark (1984) suggests that the narrative in its original form could have been an account of how Jacob in a gigantic struggle was able at night to gain permission from the Canaanite god ‘El’ to cross the Jabbok into his territory. Penuel is the site said to be the eastern part of two mounds where the Jabbok River enters Jordan valley. In their bid to append a historical signature on the geographical location of Israel as a nation, the editors did not spare their literary acumen in painting such aetiological narrative pictures that would historically convince their younger generations on their tenacious claim of the originality of their occupancy of that enviable and controversial location commonly called ‘The Fertile Crescent’.

Ugwueye (2002) recalls that Israel’s fortunes were closely connected to the international power politics of the day. Israel and Judah were just pawns in the strategic manoeuvres of the superpowers based in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Syria who vied with each other for domination of the Fertile Crescent. Israel, being aware of this, tried everything within their power to constantly resist this dominance and this was seen more in their telling and retelling of their stories using different genres to show that Yahweh, Israel’s God is superior to all other gods.

Aetiology here provides a veritable challenging tool for claiming originality and superiority in the establishment of Israel and its history against other nations, their history and their gods, especially in the Fertile Crescent.

The essence of literary analysis and the classification of creative writing into genres are not to explain away the historical ingredients of narratives, but to aid their authenticity for better understanding. In fact the relationship between God and Israel is a mysterious choice of the creator which the editors or writers of the scripture knotted and twisted in the labyrinthine Palestinian history in the second millennium B. C. The prophetic writers who assembled these traditions were aware of this and also deployed aetiology not only to establish Israel's Palestinian ancestry but also to confess their faith in Yahweh as a unique God among the gods of the neighbouring nations.

The episode at Mahanai'm offers the reader a platform for the ethical assessment of Jacob the protagonist of the narrative. At Mahanai'm, the event of Genesis 28 had a replay, indicating an editorial continuity. This is displayed in a divine encounter that gave rise to the expressions by the self-endangered Jacob thus: "This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17), and "This is God's army!" (Gen 32:2). The origin, the meaning and the historical worth of Mahanai'm (Two camps) are thus aetiologically established. Aetiology becomes the mediating agent in this literary narrative and as well offers an answer to the questions surrounding the entity and location called Mahanai'm to future generations of the Jews. Upon this holy arena in history did Jacob, the great and bedevilled patriarch encounter Yahweh a second time as an escapee fugitive; this is a form of cultic aetiology.

The encounter in Yahweh's camp triggered a prayer session that incorporates confession by Jacob as a sign of vocal remorse for the first time after cheating his brother Esau and deceiving his old blind father Isaac, which constitutes a taboo in Israel. The author used the aetiological scenario to introduce the move for reconciliation preceded by offering irresistible gifts (*מנחה*); a present meant to appease or turn somebody's eyes from wrong done. Peaceful reconciliation by sacrifice and dialogue remain the best option in conflict resolution both globally and domestically.

Humility is one basic sign of peace and reconciliation move, here Jacob refers to Esau as "my Lord" (*אדוני*) in verse 17. The careful recording of the items sent with the embassy in two groves by Jacob to Esau in verses 14 & 15 is a bold sign to show his eagerness to surrender (restitution) the family estate to his brother, and or to share his own riches acquired in course of his journey. This could serve as a lesson for the prolonged mirage of global political and economic peace, for Africa, and Nigeria in particular. Jacob undertook this venture as a reciprocation of the riches of God's mercy which he sought for in his prayers from verses 9-12. The long and short of it all is that the Jacob-Esau conflict is, among other issues, an aetiological tale to explain the origin of the animosity between the Israelites and the Edomites. The aetiology also conveys the all-important theological fact that unworthy beings like Jacob could become useful in the hands of God. Bandstra (2008) opines that by recognizing that Jacob stands for Israel, one might expect the story also to be saying something about the nation; it is either that Israel is shown to have worked assiduously hard to secure a

blessing, or that Israel had all along fought others as Jacob wrestling with God. The point of the story for the nation of Israel entering the land of promise is clear: Israel's victory will come not by the usual ways nations gain power, but by the power of the divine blessing. Westmann (1981) sees the narrative as a formularised local story meant to explain the name Penuel and Jabbok which were built into the itinerary of Jacob's return from Haran. Whatever the case, it is established that the intention behind the narrative is explanatory intervention of certain causation and origination puzzles of the Jewish national culture, and therefore highly aetiological.

The use of the word 'crossover' (*עבר*) in verse 23 features prominently and severally in the Jacoban narratives. The narrator deployed the phrase just like someone after 'lodging somewhere in the night' either as prologue or epilogue to switch over from one scene of the narrative to another. The stern dialogue that ensued between the strange figure and the protagonist Jacob from verses 28-30 is a deliberate creation of the aetiological editor in order to introduce the first ever pronouncement of the name 'Israel' (*יִשְׂרָאֵל*) from the root word 'God struggles' or 'rules/heals' or the popular RSV interpretation that 'He has struggled with god and man and prevailed'. This is with reference to Jacob seen as an individual against Esau and Laban or probably Israel as a nation against other neighbouring nations. This act in essence provides answers to the probable post-exilic curiosity concerning the history behind the origin of the name the people of God bear.

Ihemekwala (2017) observes that the Hebrews outlived defeat, captivity and the loss of their national independence largely because they possessed writings that preserved their history and traditions. Many Jews did not return to Palestine after the exile, but those who returned did so to rebuild the Temple and reconstruct a society that was more nearly a religious community than an independent nation. With passage of time the socio-political, economic, cultural and geographical challenges of the time and location they found themselves aroused an atmosphere of cogent curiosity, of which the origin of their name occupied a prominent place in the catalogue of queries. The remnant Rabbis, Priests, Levites prophets and ardent Jewish Elders had to come up with solutions to douse the situation using aetiology as an answer. The origin of the name Israel in the passage under review stands out conspicuously as an example.

It then implies that a contemporary social dysfunctional behaviour could be checked by aetiological device as an ethical scrutiny. The epilogue of the aetiological narrative which might not have been part of the long story became an addendum used to answer the question on the origin of the name Israel and also provides the origin of the tradition and reason why a Jew was forbidden from eating the sciatic muscle of an animal. The simple aetiological-cultural answer was that the strange man touched with force and thereby dislocated the hip bone of their eponymous patriarch; therefore a food taboo was enacted.

One of the very obvious significance of the study of aetiology in this passage is to caution against hasty and hazy ethical assessment of the Old Testament narratives. Aetiology helps to clarify why Yahweh (The Holy God) decided to favour a sinner, a betrayer, a deceiver, a supplanter and selfish opportunist like Jacob in this narrative, and make him a major bearer and worthy

convener of the supra-generational covenant promise. Even though it is true that God employs undeserving things and people in the realisation of his ultimate purpose, it is however, important to recognise the larger context into which the narrative is fitted with its underlying aetiology, and to ask why the author engaged the specific selection of events in the precise sequence in which he placed them. The authors used everything within their reach to explain things to the people to come after them. In the event of this truism, the corpus of the Old Testament text with its variegated forms is being recommended to be considered for proper interpretation for possible meaningful significance in the contemporary society.

Conclusion

The role of aetiology in literature as exemplified in the authorial choice of its usage in Genesis 32 is a beautiful one that cannot just be flipped over in the annals of patriarchal reading. This passage is a clear masterpiece of aetiology in the service of literature. The meeting of God and man in this aetiological passage of study shows that history is the execution of the designs of Yahweh. Jacob had to be made to understand this over and above the hubbub of his wealth and arrogance. Esau had to key into it in spite of his penury and disenchantment and they all had to blend into the patriarchal network of narration in order to align with the author's aetiological creativity in harmony and satisfaction of their theological bias.

It is important for Christians who base change of names on this passage to key into the text's aetiological make up for enhanced application. Religious literatures are different from other types of writing. They make a demand on their readers to respond positively to the expectations of the text. The aetiology of the passage makes readers realize that they are 'wrestling with God' in their actions and speeches. God has no gifts to make peace but your gifts; God has no mouth to speak the truth but your mouth; God has no one to rebuild relationships but you; God has no hand to help the poor and the needy but your hands. "We wrestle always with mysterious situations such as poverty and poverty-induced sufferings, misery, sickness, accidents, natural disaster and other situations that deserve pity and attention" (Ugwueye, 2004, p.101). Our sincere godly response to deplorable situations like the above indicates our nature and mission as 'the Israel of God' and 'children of promise'

It is by the recognition of our duty to God, men and the society and being sincerely ready to do them that we fulfil this mission. Consequent upon this we can identify the 'mysterious man' who made it so by giving us the nature we have. Each time we are identifying our maker by doing our duties according to his will, we are requesting for his blessing. Once a man gets the blessing of God he, like Jacob, becomes a changed man. This power of transformation comes from God alone. In the words of Agbese in Ugwueye (2004) "... the miracle of transformation is a confirmation of our faith in God's willingness to give us the messiah we need to transform us; the power of transforming ourselves being effectively beyond us."

Only he who is transformed by the 'mysterious man' can have his name changed from one who supplants, unseats, undermines to one who is assisted by God to prevail, contend and persevere. Transformation means change, not ordinary change but change initiated by God for the

advancement of his work. This type of change becomes the fundamental reason for change of name. Only him who attains this type of transformation can transform his society and his fellow men, having been blessed and equipped expressly to wrestle with the evils, poverty and suffering in the society. Here lies the power of aetiology in this passage. This is the weight of aetiology in literature. That is the strength of aetiology in theology.

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