Genesis 32:30-31 refers to a place which some translations call *Peniel* in its first occurrence and *Penuel* in the second occurrence. The EHV calls it *Peniel* in both occurrences. Why?   FAQ 42

This question is an excellent example of how a question that looks very simple at first really is not simple at all. There are a few complications involved in answering this question. (Make that a lot of complications!)

The main Hebrew manuscript that we use to translate the Old Testament calls this place *Peniel* the first time that it occurs (v 30) and *Penuel* the second time (v 31): "Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip" (ESV). (The name *peniel* means *face of God*.)

The first version of the EHV read: ¨Jacob named the place Peniel,[1] because he said, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life has been spared.' The sun rose as he crossed over at Peniel, and he was limping because of his thigh." (^Note 1^*Peniel* means *face of God*.)

How did we get this translation? A study of a concordance of place names in the Bible showed that some recent translations favored *Peniel* as the place name and used *Penuel* as a man's name. Since many recent Bible atlases could be expected to reflect the spellings of the most popular translations, it seemed that EHV readers would have less trouble consulting Bible atlases if we used the same spelling that would likely appear in recent atlases, so we called the place *Peniel*. It seemed that to avoid confusing readers, we should use just one spelling of the name. Two different spellings of the same place name in such a short span would look like a typo to many readers. Since the spelling difference did not have any effect on the meaning we used just one spelling.

But another check of atlases shows that our assumption was wrong and that atlases, like translations, are a mixed bag in their spelling of this place. In fact, our cartographer for the EHV Study Bible used the spelling *Penuel* on our map for the patriarchs. So choosing the consistent spelling *Peniel* would not resolve the issue of finding this place in atlases.

 (The inconsistent spelling of biblical place names is a very pervasive problem. Maps that we would like to refer to in EHV articles often use a different spelling of a name than the spelling in the EHV. Do we redraw all the maps, alter all the translations, or do we educate readers to the issue with appropriate footnotes at the right spots in the text? We are inclined toward the third option, because there is no solution in sight on the variety of spelling of place and personal names in the Bible. We have a longer discussion of this spelling problem, for which there is no resolution in sight, in our introduction to the EHV and in our FAQ 17.)

Is it possible to figure out how this spelling discrepancy arose in Genesis 32?

At first glance this might seem to a simple copying error, switching a Hebrew *u* for a Hebrew *i*. This variant between the Hebrew letter *yod (i)* and the Hebrew letter *vav (u)* is an extremely common variant in the Hebrew text. At some stages of the Hebrew script *yod* and *vaw* are virtually indistinguishable. In many cases involving common words, the reader can easily tell which letter is intended because he or she recognizes the word in context. But in the case of a proper name that occurs only once or rarely in the Bible, in reading handwritten manuscripts it is sometimes impossible to tell which letter was intended. This problem occurs very often in the lists of personal names in Chronicles, and the EHV often notes the variant spellings in the footnotes. EHV did not, however, footnote every *vaw/yod* variant in Chronicles so as not to bog down the reading of the text too much, but it lists enough examples to illustrate the problem.

But that simple explanation of a copying mistake is suspect here. Because the two versions of the name stand side-by-side, regardless of which spelling he chose, wouldn't a scribe have written the word the same way both times? If this variant originated as a copying error, it could only have occurred fairly late in the history of the copying of the text (more than a thousand years after the writing of the text)

because in the oldest forms of the Hebrew alphabet, the two letters *vav* and *yod* look significantly different.

Furthermore, there are other interesting *yod/waw* interchanges in the Pentateuch. The *yod/waw* interchange here in Genesis 32 is parallel to another one in Genesis 4:18 where the variant spellings (*Mehujael/Mehijael*) are right next to each other. The same thing happens with the name Abigail in 1 Sam 25:14 and 18. Something may lie behind the way these letters were used at the time of the earliest written Hebrew which allowed them to be written interchangeably, and for which the explanation may never be recovered.

(It's worth noting that the third person feminine pronoun in Genesis is often spelled with a *waw* in the middle like the third person masculine pronoun, and yet the Masoretes always pointed it to be pronounced as "*hee*" (הִוא)[1] rather than "*hu*" in cases in which it clearly refers to a woman. Does this strange situation indicate a spelling variant, a copying variant, or an updating of the grammatical form? It seems that perhaps the third option is most likely.)

In Judges 8:8, 9, 17, the other main story involving this place, *Penuel* is the regular Hebrew spelling of the name. So maybe the first spelling of *Peniel* in Genesis was just a mistake, and we should make them all *Penuel*?

Not so fast. It may be more complicated than that. In the Waltke O'Conner Hebrew syntax book, in paragraph 8.2, it is suggested that a possible explanation of the variant is a survival in Genesis 32 of two of the archaic case endings of old Hebrew: The theory is that the *i* in *Peniel* is accusative plural (the Hebrew word for *face* is plural) and the *u* in *Penuel* is nominative plural. (Or maybe one of them is an old construct ending.) If an archaic case ending was involved, this would help explain the confusion of later copyists, who no longer knew the ancient case endings. (There are some other possible archaic endings in the Pentateuch and Psalms.) But in the grammatical structure of these verses, this argument does not seem particularly convincing.

The new BHQ volume of Genesis provides information about how early versions handle this problem variant: The Old Greek translates the name in both 32:31 and 32:32 as Εἶδος θεοῦ *face of God*. Of the other Greek versions, Aquila also translates the name into Greek, but Symmachus does not. All other references to this place in the Old Greek (Judges 8:8, 9, 17; 1 Kings 12:25) do not translate the term but rather render it as Φανουηλ. The Targums Jonathan and Neofiti keep the spelling *Peniel* in Genesis 32:31. All the other versions (Samaritan Pentateuch, Vulgate, Syriac, Targum Onqelos) transliterate the occurrence in verse 31 as *Penuel*, evidently assimilating it with the spelling in v. 32. So it appears that most of the early versions want to harmonize the spelling of the two occurrences in these two successive verses, even though the copyists in the Masoretic tradition retained the two distinct spellings in their respective places. (In other words, these ancient versions did the very thing that EHV and NIV did, though they harmonized in the opposite direction). Or (and this seems most likely) the evidence may simply indicate that the translators of the ancient versions were as confused as we are by the whole situation. (A fairly good rule of thumb is that if the ancient versions are confused, our chance of becoming unconfused is not very good.)

Another approach for us would be to go by majority vote. In the Hebrew Old Testament, *Penuel* is the most common spelling. This would suggest changing all the occurrences to *Penuel* as some of the ancient versions did. Though the standard Hebrew text has the two different spellings in the two verses, other ancient versions have the spelling *Penuel* also in the first occurrence.

So what are the possibilities?

1) There may be a copying mistake here. But we have already said that this would be a surprising mistake to make with the two words so close to each other. But anyone who has been an editor

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[1] This occurs very often in Genesis: 2:12; 3:12 & 20; 4:22; 7:2; 12:14, 18 &19; 14:7 & 8; 17:14; 19:20; 20:3 & 5 (2x); 21:22 & 24; 22:20; 23:2, 15 & 19; 24:44; 38:21

knows that astounding mistakes happen, and typos sometime remain uncorrected for centuries. The Masoretes, in fact, deliberately did not correct obvious mistakes in the Hebrew text but only called attention to them in marginal notes.

2) The earliest copyists of Genesis, or perhaps the author of Genesis, had reason to spell the name two different ways. The most likely reason for this is that the spelling *Peniel* is intended to reflect the name and pronunciation of Jacob's time and the spelling *Penuel* is intended to reflect the name and pronunciation at Moses' time or a copyist's time. There are in fact some other updatings of place names in Genesis.

It seems the best solution for the EHV in Genesis 32 is to spell the name *Peniel* the first time and to spell it *Penuel* the second time and add this footnote: *Penuel* is an alternate spelling of *Peniel*, and to offer no explanation since any explanation would be a guess.

Oh, one more complication. In Genesis 32 the Hebrew verse numbers do not match the English verse numbers, so if you want to look this up in the Hebrew text, you have to look at Genesis 32:31-32, as you may have noticed in the textual evidence above.

The lessons to be drawn: Bible translation is tremendously complicated. A single letter can generate a lot of data and a lot of theories. There are features of the Hebrew text for which we do not have a clear explanation and which seemingly already stumped the ancient translators. However, these difficulties do not prevent us from conveying the meaning of the Hebrew text. The lesson to be learned from Jacob's encounter with the LORD is the same whether the place is called Peniel or Penuel or both.

Topics: Textual criticism, spelling, place names, Peniel, Penuel, FAQ 42