

Afterword

The Ongoing Wrestle

Jacob as a young man dreamed about his true soul, about a ramp from here to Eternity with angels moving up and down. As a mature man Jacob had a second deep-night visitation. This occurred after about two decades living with his uncle Labon, acquiring two wives (Labon's daughters Leah and Rachel for whom he had labored seven years each), many children, servants, and much wealth. The day after the night in which Jacob and his family had slipped away from Labon, Labon pursued his missing family members and some missing objects. Jacob by a stroke of luck avoided a showdown with Labon. But now Jacob hears that his estranged brother Esau, who two decades ago was angry enough to kill him, was heading his way with 400 men.

He sent generous gifts ahead to his brother. He divided his company into two parts hoping at least one would escape. And he spent the night in deep prayer.

“Save me I pray from my brother Esau, for I am afraid that he may come and destroy me, sparing neither mother nor child. But thou didst say I will prosper you and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea which is beyond all counting.”
(Genesis 32:11,12)

Alone, Jacob wrestled all night with a mystery figure, a nameless angel of God, one of the more severe angels. We might as well say that Jacob wrestled with God, with Final Reality; for whatever angel it was, every angel is a symbolization of a specific experience of the Awesome Final Reality. Final Reality was confronting Jacob in the coming of his brother and 400 men. Jacob had to make some kind of response to this encounter. His prayer was a wrestling match with an angel that could not be defeated.

But Jacob hung onto this angel all night long. Just before dawn the angel asked to be released, but Jacob still insisted on a blessing. The angel's blessing begins with a question, “What is your name?”

“Jacob” said Jacob. We need to recall what was contained in the name “Jacob.” It contained all that had happened before: the tricking and cheating of his brother Esau, the tricking and cheating of Labon, the entire creative aggressiveness one might find in a typical personality type eight. Jacob was the name for this man's particular personality, a habit of living built up over the years of his life. But now, simply being Jacob the tricking, cheating, power-dealing personality was not adequate for tomorrow morning's encounters.

The blessing-giving angel continued: “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you strove with God and with men and prevailed.” The word “Israel” means striver or wrestler with God.

Jacob then asked the mystery figure for his name. Here is what the figure said.

“Why do you ask my name?”, but he gave him his blessing there. Jacob called the place Peniel (Face of God) because he said “I have seen God face to face and my life is spared.”(Genesis 32:29-31)

Clearly, the Genesis story teller wants us to understand that Jacob had wrestled all night with God, the nameless God, the God no name can contain. While this God encounters us through specific angels, through specific states of Awe, Jacob did not

actually see God's face. He only saw and wrestled with an angel. Indeed, there were 401 angels who were heading his way.

The all night wrestling match had taken its toll. The angel had dislocated Jacob's hip.

The sun rose as Jacob passed through Penuel (Face of God) limping because of his hip.
(Genesis 32: 31)

Jacob raised his eyes and saw Esau coming toward him with four hundred men.
(Genesis 33:1)

The situation has not changed, but Jacob has changed. He has some Freedom from being plain old Jacob. He is Israel now. He is persistent wrestler with God. He has the Freedom to meet this threatening situation with astonishing creativity. If you wish to have a full picture of Jacob's creativity, read the entire 33rd chapter of Genesis. Jacob makes clear his desire for peace and honor with his brother. At the same time he does not trust Esau, and he takes creative steps to keep his distance.

The story of Jacob is just a story, a story told over and over, but the Jacob of this story is indeed the father of many descendants, perhaps including you and me. Certainly Moses is a descendent of this Freedom, and Joshua, and all the judges, and all the prophets. Jeremiah certainly had his own all night wrestling matches when he had to prophesy the end of his nation and the dispersion of most of its people into various places of exile. Jeremiah records the pain of his nights of wrestling with the rejection that accompanied proclaiming his message, which was a message of doom to a obsolete mode of living. But Jeremiah's message was not a message of anger or despair; it was a message of hope that this Spirit community could continue without its nationhood wrapper, that a new covenant was called for in the very hearts of an exiled people.

We see Jacob's all night wrestling match reenacted in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is confronting betrayal, capture, rejection, scorn, torture, and death. Here is Mark's telling of the story, "Horror and dismay came over him, and he said to them (Peter James and John), 'My heart is ready to break with grief; stop here, and stay awake.'" (Mark 14:34) Three times he chastens his sleeping disciples who could not stay awake for such a grim encounter. But Jesus, with the same Freedom we saw in Jacob's all night vigil, does face the next morning a victor in his own personal drama. As Jesus had concluded, "This is not what I want, but not my will but Thy will be done." In the conclusion of Mark's telling of this story we hear Jesus saying these words:

Still sleeping? Still taking your ease? Enough! The hour has come. . . . Up, let us go forward. Mark 14:41,42

After the next terrible day was all over, the disciples spent all day Saturday in a state of sheer emptiness. Then Sunday morning (I am elaborating the story a bit) some angels spoke in the ears of some of these distraught women and men. "No longer shall his name be "Jesus," but "Jesus, the Messiah," shall be his name. So, now we who are the descendants of this happening, no longer merely see a remarkable, profound, clever teacher who is now dead, we see a new humanity who is "in Christ." That is, we see a body of ordinary human beings who are now something more than sleepy disciples who cannot face the horrors of history. We see a functioning body, a group of people who refer to themselves as the Body of Christ and who are manifesting in history the life that was present in Jesus, an aliveness which could not be destroyed by all that estranged humanity could do.