

Jacob's Struggle

"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29).

In the book of Genesis we find the story of Jacob's wrestling match with a mysterious man. This is a minefield of symbols to be interpreted humanly and religiously. To comprehend the text we need to view it in the context of the story of Jacob's reunion with his brother Esau. Jacob, together with his household, is heading home after a twenty year sojourn outside the land of Canaan. Along the way he learns that his brother Esau, together with 400 men, is coming to meet him. Fearful that Esau still harbours murderous rage over a long-ago conflict, Jacob prepares for the worst (32:4-22).

The night before the two brothers meet, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure, thought to be a divine representative (Gen. 32:23-33). And what happens the next day?

"Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him...he kissed him; and they wept" (33:4).

Esau's reaction is startling. Last time they were together Esau was out to kill Jacob. Now he shows nothing but love toward his brother who deceived him all those years ago (Gen. 27). Could the events of the night before have had something to do with this dramatic change of heart? Jewish interpretative traditions¹ certainly think so, in some cases viewing Jacob's wrestling partner to be 'the ministering angel of Esau.' Before Jacob is ready to meet Esau in the flesh, he has to undergo a spiritual confrontation.

While there are multiple ways to approach this text, one is to explore it from a psychological angle. Thus, Jacob is seen to be wrestling with his personal history, anxieties, guilt. The blessing he grasps is the blessing of having endured a crisis, confronted his inner demons and matured in the process. In this view, Jacob emerges a new person: free from fear, at peace with himself and those around him. Esau senses this, it disarms him, and reconciliation is possible.

Does this interpretation speak to you? Was there a time when you wrestled amidst crisis, 'alone', 'in the

night' and came through a stronger, wiser, mature person?

There is another current in Jewish interpretation: one that relates Jacob's ordeal to the struggle of the Jewish people in coming to terms with the fact of their election by God. After all, wouldn't it be easier to fit in with society; to *not* be identified by circumcision, Shabbat or dietary practices? It would certainly have saved centuries of persecution, sorrow.

Yet struggle is part of fidelity. To live the Torah means to strive for the ways of God; not settling for moral mediocrity nor despairing of the possibility of a transformed earth. Yes, it entails wounds that at times produce a limp. But it also holds the priceless blessing and responsibility of belonging to God and God's people. Certainly, Jacob's story draws us to be attentive to the fact that throughout their history the Jewish people have had to struggle against extraordinary odds, and have prevailed, time and again, to grasp anew the irrevocable blessing of their identity.

Amid the political complexities of our time, there are those who are quick to judge the Jewish people on account of certain government policies of the modern state of Israel, rather than making appropriate distinctions between the two. Yet "Israel",^[2] whether understood as a nation state or as a covenantal people, produces plenty of its own critics and prophets from within, and this too forms part of its struggle for self-determination.

It is important for Christians to ponder this biblical moment in the book of Genesis when God's choice of Abraham finds new expression in and through Jacob's struggle. It is vital for understanding Judaism, Jesus, and our own call to 'be' church—not replacing God's covenant with the Jewish people which endures eternally, but rather learning from its truth. As St Pope John Paul II said on his visit to Sydney (26 Nov 1986):

"For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with an irrevocable calling." •

LIGHT OF TORAH

1. Sources: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (New York, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006); Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem, 2009). Scripture: NJPS.

2. The term 'Israel' has multiple meanings. It can refer to the biblical land; the name given to the patriarch Jacob or to one of the twelve tribes issuing from his progeny; the political nation state named Israel (either in its ancient or modern context). "Israel" is also a theological reference to the Jewish people, from their origins in history to their ultimate destiny in accord with God's designs.

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