

## “The Renovation of Jacob”

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The story of Jacob wrestling with the “man” stretches credulity if you want the Bible to be literally true, but as part of the legend of the patriarchs, it inspires the imagination.

The protagonist—Jacob (*ya’acov*) is a heel. His name in Hebrew actually means “heel” because he was born holding onto the heel of his twin brother, Esau. His personality is what gave the word “heel” its pejorative meaning as someone who is a selfish, insensitive clod. Or, a Jacob.

He was a manipulative opportunist and a chronic liar. As the scene opens on today’s reading, he is fleeing his uncle Laban, whom he has cheated (having himself been first cheated by Laban—apparently it ran in the family). He is returning home to meet his brother, whose ancestral blessing Jacob had stolen 20 years before. In this scene, Jacob is between that proverbial “rock and a hard place”: he can’t go back because Laban will have his head, and ahead of him, Esau is moving toward him with 400 men—purpose unknown.

The setting is the shore of the River Jabbok. Ever alert to people doing unto him what he would willingly do unto them, Jacob has sent his household across the river for safety, and in fact (although this passage doesn’t mention it), he separated them into two groups so that even if one half is attacked, the other half could escape. For whatever reason—the Bible doesn’t tell us that—“*Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*”

The Hebrew text is clear about the wrestler; it uses the word *ish*, which in Hebrew can only mean “man” – a physical, most human man. A *man* wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. But readers from time immemorial have pondered the thing and preferred to believe that the writer really meant an *angel*, but that is not what the Hebrew text says. Jacob himself believed it was God who attacked him. In the light of day, when it was all over, he claimed, “*I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.*”

The battle went on all night. This man, this God-with-muscles, wrestled with the chosen one of Abraham’s line, unable—or unwilling—to defeat him. Is this the God we know? Is this the compassionate God who comes to us in the dark of night when **we** are between a rock and a hard place, and protects us until the dawn? I don’t think so. Jacob’s “God” is fearsome and challenging and pushes too hard when Jacob is already under sufficient stress.

The Old Testament has the unfortunate reputation of presenting God as more harsh, more judgmental than does the New Testament, which we like to believe, speaks more freely of God’s love. But today, beside the story of Jacob wrestling with his nemesis, we hear the gospel story of the unjust judge and the widow with *chuzpah* who nagged the judge until he gave her the justice she deserved. Jesus tells us that this is “*a parable about the need to pray always and not to lose heart.*” But it certainly isn’t one of the New Testament’s stories about love!

The point of both stories, however, speaks to a fundamental issue that we Christians share with our Jewish siblings: We not only acknowledge the same ancient tradition—that Abraham and Sarah were our common ancestors—we also both live in hope and anticipation of a better future. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*” The Reader’s Kaddish, a Jewish prayer of the same genre, says, “*May God’s kingdom soon prevail, in our own day, our own lives.*” We pray those hopeful lines even when there is no reason for hope in sight.

Both Jacob and the widow showed the kind of tenacity encouraged for each one of us in our prayers. Not because we will convince God to do things our way. Not because we will thus keep God from

overpowering us. But because within the process of prayer lies the process of **transformation**. Sometimes, like Jacob, we do have to strive with God—or more accurately, God has to strive with **us** before we open ourselves to transformation. Sometimes God has to push and pull us as we dig in our heels. But our God is not a bully. The mysterious man did not **defeat** Jacob; the battle simply and powerfully *transformed* him.

After that exhausting night, Jacob demanded a blessing, but received instead a new identity from the one who would not identify himself. “*You shall no longer be called ya’acov, but yisrael, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.*” From that day forward, we hear no more about Jacob making shady deals. Jacob and the people descended from him were known as Israel, which means “the ones who strive with God, and prevail.”

This story is *not* about *survival*. The story of Jacob is about *transformation*. Think back on your greatest struggles, the ones you tell about later, the ones you remember in every detail. They are not struggles you merely survived, but struggles that left you transformed: different somehow, and stronger.

Consider your most painful decisions, your most exhausting confrontations. God was not protecting you, but struggling along with you so that you would find redemption in the struggle. God doesn’t bring the chaos, but God does engage in it beside you, on your back, riding herd on you, in your heart, battling with your fears, transforming you so that you can do more than survive to face another day. As you struggle, **if** you engage in the struggle, you are being metaphorically renamed because you will simply **not** be the same person prepared to take your rightful place as a chosen instrument of God, bringing Christ to the nations.

Things change when you willingly engage with God, when you refuse to run away. Jacob did not run away; he stood his ground. Did it hurt? No doubt his hip was a bear on every rainy day from that time forward.

Was it worth it? Jacob saw the face of God and lived to tell about it. In the dark hours of the night, when we find ourselves wrestling with our own demons—and we will—put yourself in Jacob’s shoes. Hang on with everything you have, even if it hurts. Remember that God does **not** bring the pain, God does **not** cause bad things to happen, but God walks through pain with us, and will help us to find the redemption in it. With God on our side, the pain will not defeat us, only transform us.

There is no better example of that in today’s world than the situation in Ukraine. Before the Russian invasion, Ukraine was an ordinary country with the same problems and blessings as most other nations. Now, having experienced the worse terror and destruction that war can bring, and with no end in sight, they emerge as a brave, determined people whose love of country is an inspiration for the world. They have already been *transformed*.

The ancient Israelites who wrote the Hebrew Bible were not historians. They were storytellers. They recorded their experience of God through stories—much like Jesus, an Israelite himself, did through parables. The story of Jacob’s night-long wrestling match is a story of transformation—not only of the man Jacob, but of his people who would become a nation. Take heart, then, when you wrestle with your own demons—and you will: Don’t despair, don’t give up hope, know that Crucifixion is always followed by Resurrection. Know that your struggle *will* make you stronger—even if your hip hurts every time it rains.

*AMEN.*

Readings: Genesis 32:3-8; 22-30; Psalm 121; II Timothy 3:14:4-5; Luke 18:1-8a.