

Wrestling Jacob

PROBLEM TEXTS (2)

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The story of Jacob's encounter with the angel at the ford of Jabbok (*Gen. 32:22-32*) is one of the most gripping and moving of the patriarchal narratives. It is a strange story, and some of the questions which it naturally raises in the reader's mind have to remain unanswered, because no answer is available.

It is often suggested that the story had an earlier currency before it was written down in the only form which we know. This is probably true: some centuries elapsed between the event and the recording of it in Genesis, and it was probably handed down by oral transmission, especially perhaps at the place where it happened. But the form of the narrative in that earlier stage, or the significance which was attached to it, 'must be to a great extent conjectural'. So said Sir James Frazer in his discussion of the story, and he was quite ready to resort to conjecture in the absence of hard evidence. But even if we had hard evidence for the prehistory of this narrative (instead of having nothing but conjecture), such evidence would not really be relevant to the interpretation of the biblical passage: for that the written context is of much greater importance. We have one further piece of evidence: that is Hosea's reference to the incident (*Hos. 12:3, 4*).

Probably the expression, 'wrestling with God in prayer', is based on this story. 'Wrestling with God in prayer' is a vivid way of describing that

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'effectual fervent prayer' of a righteous person which, James assures us, avails much (*Jas. 5:16*), but it is doubtful if we should connect it with Jacob's wrestling. For it was not wrestling Jacob who obtained the blessing, but disabled, weeping, clinging Jacob.

The incident at the ford, in fact, crystallized the whole course of Jacob's life up to that point. He had always been eager to secure the divine blessing for himself, and thought he must bend all his energies to gain it, by fair means or foul. Throughout those long years he had been wrestling with God in the sense of wrestling against him, trying to compel him to do what he so wholeheartedly desired, but the blessing continually eluded him. Only when his strength and self-confidence were drained away, when he was incapacitated by a stronger than himself and could do nothing but hang on for dear life and refuse to let the stranger go without bestowing his blessing, was that blessing actually given. Jacob received the name Israel there because he had 'striven with God and man, and had prevailed'; he left the place empowered and enriched because, as he said, 'I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved' (*Gen. 32:30*). There is no need to import this language into the narrative, because it is there already, and points to the sense which the author intended—the primary sense.

If the primary sense is that which the author intended, the plenary sense is that which later generations of readers have seen in the narrative and have appropriated for themselves. The plenary sense is valid if, and only if, it is implicit in the primary sense. One instance of the plenary sense is found in Hosea's reference to the incident, where he applies to the current state

of Israel the experience of the nation's ancestor. Like the author of Genesis, Hosea sees in the incident a parable of Jacob's dealings with God and the development of his character:

'In his manhood he strove with God;
he strove with the angel and prevailed,
he wept and sought his favour.'

With the coming of Christ, and the new understanding of the OT scriptures as bearing witness to him, a new dimension of biblical interpretation was opened up. But the NT interpretation of the OT is restrained and disciplined in comparison with what we find in the post-apologetic age. There is no express reference to wrestling Jacob in the NT. But in the middle of the second century Justin Martyr, in his debate with Trypho the Jew, is sure that the mysterious wrestler whom the narrator describes as 'a man' and of whom Jacob speaks as 'God', must be the one whom Christians acknowledge as both God and man. Such an application of sacred scripture is quite foreign to Trypho, and he cannot understand how any one could expound it as Justin does. But to Justin this understanding of the incident is all of a piece with his understanding of other OT incidents in which God, or his angel, appears to human beings or speaks to them in human form. The christological exposition of such incidents is hardly attested, if at all, in the NT, but it was a well-established tradition by Justin's time, for Justin can scarcely be supposed to have initiated it.

English-speaking Christians have a superb example of the plenary sense of this incident in Charles Wesley's poem *Wrestling Jacob* ('Come, O thou traveller unknown'). Its twelve stanzas present a thorough-going transmutation of the OT story into something akin to Paul's mysterious experience recounted in *2 Cor. 12:2-10*, from which he learned the lesson: 'When I am weak, then I am strong.' But this, I am confident, is the lesson which the author of Genesis himself intends to be drawn from the story of wrestling Jacob. Charles Wesley, in drawing out and developing this lesson, does no violence to the primary sense; rather, he rephrases it in a Christian idiom:

'And when my all of strength shall fail,
I shall with the God-Man prevail.'