

Jacob's Night Visitor and the Name Israel

The story we are about to investigate is one of which you may feel you are familiar with until you begin reading it. Part of this problem has to do with the superscriptions or paragraph headings that have been in our bibles for a long time and have become so familiar to us that we take them for granted. I myself am guilty of remembering a paragraph by looking at the paragraph heading as opposed to reading the actual paragraph itself. However, if you read the text critically and let sacred scripture speak for itself, you may get an entirely new appreciation of this passage.

The first thing we notice when we read this story is that the text never includes the word "angel." We know it is a divine being (later implied to be a messenger of the Lord) but exactly with whom Jacob wrestles on the banks of the Wadi-Jabbok is not clear. Next we notice that the man Jacob has to contend with acts somewhat strangely (not entirely like any of the angels or messengers of the Lord that we have encountered thus far). He has such great physical strength he can injure Jacob's hip. Also he stops fighting with Jacob as dawn approaches, an odd act for a divine messenger and certainly not something we have seen before in the heavenly messengers we have encountered. Finally, this messenger has the power to name, or in this case, rename Jacob. We are dealing with a being who at times is much less than an angel (he can't stand the sunlight) but at times much more (having the power to name).

Before we get into the all-important renaming of Jacob (an episode that occurs again in Genesis Chapter 35) we need to discuss the composite nature of the story that we find in sacred scripture. Many cultures had stories of great men who contended with divine adversaries. Hercules had his Labors, Ulysses had to fight the Cyclopes, and Gilgamesh had to fight the evil Humbaba. The Jews too had their stories of a hero contending with a divine entity, but there is much more going on here than simply a story of wrestling.

Of all the stories about the Patriarchs that we find in Genesis, this one was probably of the greatest importance to the Jews. This may strike you as odd. For Christians, thanks mostly to St. Paul, the Patriarch Abraham is clearly the most important of all the Patriarchs mentioned in the Book of Genesis.

Although the stories that surround Joseph were entertaining and Isaac's arduous pursuit of a bride had its appeal, for the Jews it was the story of Jacob that was *the* story of all stories in the Patriarchal history of Genesis. This story was of paramount importance to the Jewish people for the simple fact that here, for the first time in sacred scripture, they are given the name, Israel:

"But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go until you bless me.' 'What is your name?' the man asked. He answered, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed.'" Genesis 32:28-29

As notes in your bible may indicate, the name Israel means something akin to "the one who contended with God," (not someone who walked with God or someone who was friends with God, but one who contended or struggled with God). Israel, the very name of the Jews, indicated the relationship they would have with God - an intimate struggle which, although painful and trying at times, would ultimately result in God's blessing.

Wrestling with God

Clearly for Roman Catholics, an ancient story about how a semi-nomadic people received their national identity is of limited importance. It is one of countless etymological stories that are preserved in the Old Testament to help us know something about the many peoples that populated the Near East throughout Jewish history. However, like all scripture, there are many ways to read this story.

The Church Fathers and Genesis

*Therefore Jacob, who purified his heart of all pretenses and was manifesting a peaceable disposition, first cast off all that was his, then remained behind alone and wrestled with God. For whoever forsakes worldly things comes nearer to the image and likeness of God. What is it to wrestle with God other than to enter upon the struggle for virtue, to contend with one who is stronger and to become a better imitator of God than the others are? **St. Ambrose, Happy Life, 7.30***

What a wonderful new concept we gain from this story and it is one for which we must thank our Jewish brothers and sisters. The idea that we must wrestle with the Almighty and emerge from the struggle blessed is an audacious one. The idea that our relationship with God can be characterized by a one-on-one struggle (something so intimate that we touch God and He touches us) is hard to believe. Note in the text, although he had his family and servants nearby, when it came time for him to struggle with the divine being he had to struggle alone.

The Magisterium and Genesis

Sacred Scripture teaches us the importance of names in conferring upon someone a unique mission or a special gift. God called Abram “Abraham” because he was to become the “father of many nations” (*GN 17: 5*). Jacob was called “Israel” because he had “contended with God and man and prevailed” (*GN 32:29*). The names enshrined in this hallowed monument will forever hold a sacred place among the countless descendants of Abraham. Like his, their faith was tested. Like Jacob, they were immersed in the struggle to discern the designs of the Almighty. May the names of these victims never perish! May their suffering never be denied, belittled or forgotten! And may all people of goodwill remain vigilant in rooting out from the heart of man anything that could lead to tragedies such as this! **Pope Benedict XVI Address at Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, May 2009**

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