

5 August 2023

Wrestling Till Break of Dawn (Genesis 32. 3-8, 22-32)

© Sarah Bachelard

Why do we still read the ancestral tales in the book of Genesis? Why do we keep bothering with these enigmatic and sometimes frankly abhorrent accounts of bartering for wives, livestock and land, of fratricidal conflict and profoundly flawed heroes? What do they have to do with us? Why don't we focus our spiritual reading on what's truly edifying in the bible – the Sermon on the Mount, the healing, forgiving presence of Jesus, the redeeming love of God?

These are good questions. I get asked them at reasonably regular intervals, and those of you who've been around for a while will know that I've had a few 'goes' at responding. A few weeks ago, under direction from the lectionary, we touched into some of the more unsettling chapters in the story of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham. And now we're dipping back in again, towards the end of the story of Jacob – who is Abraham's grandson and one of the most complex of all biblical characters. Why are we bothering? Let's look and see...

Jacob's story begins, as so many of them do, with God's overcoming of impossibility. Rebekah, his mother, is barren and conceives in response to her husband Isaac's prayer. Having done so, she wishes she had not – it's twins! 'The children struggled together within her', the text of Genesis records; 'and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?"' (Gen. 25. 22).¹ She goes to inquire of the Lord, and receives an ominous oracle of annunciation: 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided ... the elder shall serve the younger' (Gen. 25. 23). This thread in the drama of Jacob and of his older brother Esau functions a bit like a 'how the camel got its hump' kind of fable. Esau is identified with the nation of Edom and Jacob with Israel. Robert Alter writes, 'the story of two rival brothers

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 127.

virtually asks us to read it as a political allegory',² and he goes on: early Jewish commentaries 'tend to make Esau out to be a vicious brute', while Jacob is depicted as a 'quiet man', 'the model of pious Israel'.³

But this neat moral distinction between the two brothers, and so by implication between the two nations, doesn't do justice to the text itself, which, says Alter, 'presents matters rather differently'.⁴ For embedded in Jacob's name, *Ya'aqob*, is the word *'aqob*, which is the adjective used for a heart that is crooked.⁵ And so Jacob proves to be – first tricking Esau out of his rights as the first-born, and later deceiving their father into bestowing his final blessing on himself rather than his brother. Unsurprisingly, Esau is enraged and plots to kill his brother after his father's death. So, with the help of his mother, Jacob flees to the house of his uncle and makes his fortune there. Our passage picks up the story when Jacob, at the Lord's behest, is returning to his home country. Little wonder, he's terrified of what his brother might do when they meet.

Ever the schemer, Jacob does his best to pour oil on troubled waters. He sends wave after wave of placatory gifts ahead of his party – droves of goats, sheep, camels, cows and donkeys – all designated as presents to 'my lord, Esau'. A couple of days later, as night falls, Jacob and his immediate family come to the ford of Jabbok. They cross, and having settled his family there perhaps as a last line of defence, Jacob crosses back. Finally, says the text, he was left alone.

When Jacob stole his father's blessing, he was aided and abetted by his mother, and he covered himself with skins. But this night, blessing will come through uncovering and stripping, in solitude and darkness. Jacob has spent his life trying to acquire things, trying to get one over those around him. This night, he divests himself of 'everything that he had'. It's a moment of reckoning. There are no more defences, no more distractions or excuses. And in *this* place, alone and dispossessed, Jacob

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1981), 42.

³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43.

⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43.

⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 43.

suddenly finds himself in the struggle of his life. 'And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.' Alter notes: 'The image of wrestling has been implicit throughout the Jacob story: in his grabbing Esau's heel as he emerges from the womb, in his striving with Esau for birthright and blessing ... and in his multiple contendings with [his uncle] Laban. Now, in this culminating moment of his life story, the characterizing image of wrestling is made explicit and literal'.⁶

So who is this shadowy antagonist? The text first speaks of 'a man'; Jacob will later imply it was God. Either way, Alter suggests the important point is that Jacob's adversary resists identification and hence control. 'Appearing to Jacob in the dark of the night ... he is the embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob's dark night of the soul. He is obviously in some sense a doubling of Esau as adversary, but he is also a doubling of all with whom Jacob has had to contend, and he may equally well be an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself'.⁷ Yet surprisingly, Jacob holds his own. He is wounded in the struggle – but in the end it's his adversary who wants to leave the fight, and Jacob who continues to hold fast: 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' Which, when you think about it, is a strange thing to say. Whatever possesses Jacob to think there might be a blessing in this struggle? And his antagonist's response is equally mysterious: 'What is your name?'

Why are we bothering with this story? To me, it has a primal quality, as if something profound and elemental is here being discovered about the relationship between self-dispossession, truth and blessing.

When Jacob is asked to give his name, he's being invited to acknowledge who he is and has been. 'Jacob', he says and ain't that the truth! His name means 'heel-grabber,' 'deceiver,' 'crooked one,' and that's how he has lived. For Jacob, the revealing of his name is as much a confession as it is an identification. Ironically, in naming himself as 'deceiver', he is being totally honest. And to this confession, perhaps only because of it, the man replies, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob

⁶ Alter, *Genesis*, p.180.

⁷ Alter, *Genesis*, p.181.

[deceiver], but Israel (meaning 'he strives with God') for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.' The mediaeval Jewish commentator Rashi (Rabbi Schlomo Itshaqi) expresses the resonance of this new name as follows: 'It will no longer be said that the blessings came to you through deviousness', but instead through your exposure to and striving with God.⁸ And notice that Jacob prevails here, he comes to merit his new name, not by winning, but simply by hanging on; by refusing to run away from whatever this reality is and what it shows him about himself. This is how the great 19th century poet Rilke reads the story in his poem, 'The Man Watching', which ends: 'Winning does not tempt that man; This is how he grows: by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings'.

It's as if Jacob somehow dimly apprehends that only by staying in this struggle, only by undergoing its wounding, can he come home – to himself, to his country, to his family and his future. Unlike his old way of being, his new identity isn't one that he controls or can manipulate to his own advantage. Jacob is known and called into something new by his protagonist; but Jacob never learns his name. He is blessed by a reality bigger than himself; Jacob the deceiver becomes the Israel of God through an encounter he never masters.

And it seems to me, this extraordinary story gives an insight into the true nature of blessing, which is not necessarily a comfortable or consoling gift couched in sweet words on a gentle Celtic breeze. For Jacob, blessing came at the end of a demanding, exhausting and even terrifying struggle, which required him to be dispossessed of his old securities, to let go an identity that had seemed to serve him, but was in fact utterly inadequate to the call to be reconciled to his history, his relationships, his being in God. The discovery of an expanding identity and vocation can involve the almost annihilating process of uncovering and facing a fuller truth about ourselves. 'I have seen God face to face', Jacob says, 'and yet my life is preserved' (Gen.32.30).⁹

⁸ Alter, *Genesis*, p.182.

⁹ Paul Borgman notes how the Hebrew text makes extensive use of the notion of 'face'. When Jacob is sending gifts ahead to placate his brother, 'he said to himself: I will wipe (the anger from) his face with the gift that

And I wonder what this story suggests to you about your own journey – and also about the journey that we in Australia are collectively embarked upon to be reconciled to our history? The people of Israel tell the story of Jacob, whose name gives them their name as a nation. It's a story that faces up to the moral ambiguity of a founding father, that celebrates his achievements while being clear about the cost of his actions to a brother defrauded by deception, and cheated of his birthright. Robert Alter's words seem newly apt: 'the story of two rival brothers virtually asks us to read it as a political allegory'. Might we become willing to tell such a story?

Jacob shows that to be truly blessed often means being wounded at the same time. In the old Greek stories, the touch of a God was always experienced as both violation and gift. When at the end of that long night the sun rose, Jacob went on – limping. But he limped into an unimaginably different future. The story continues: 'Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him ...'. And 'Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept' (Gen 33.4). The suffering of profound blessing promises radically deepened reconciliation with ourselves, with God and with one another. May we too have the courage to seek and to hang on for such a blessing – for a truer life, for ourselves and for all with whom we share it.

goes ahead of my face; afterward, when I see his face perhaps he will lift up my face. The gift crossed over ahead of his face'. Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), p.144.