

MAMA'S BOY

What turns, changes, transforms Jacob from a lily-livered, lying little mama's boy into the Great Patriarch from whom springs the nation of Israel? That is what fascinates me. That is what I want to discover from this story. In our time, of course, we know that concepts about "The Fall" are merely ancient legends. We are all born innocent, and essentially good. Unless we have done something really bad, we do not need to be "converted." We just need to go on doing the best we can, and we can live good and wholesome lives. Oh yes, a few mistakes here and there, to be sure, but nothing to worry about.

The biblical stories are never like that, however. None of our biblical heroes just go on doing what comes naturally. Before they can serve God or God's Kingdom, they have to go through a major transformation – maybe even several of them. Otherwise they stay so focused on this world and on their own needs and desires that they remain essentially unaware of the presence of God, unconcerned about what God is trying to accomplish here, and oblivious of what God may be asking of them.

The other side of this same coin is it would be a huge mistake to write off Jacob from what we see and know about him by the end of Genesis 27. By Genesis 28, Jacob is fleeing for his life, clear out of Palestine to Haran, north of the Euphrates River, hundreds of miles away. His brother Esau will kill him if he can catch him, and no fair-minded person could blame Esau. Our society has little or no regard for a father's blessing, but in Isaac's time, hardly anything could have been of greater value. Many of us do not even notice that despite the deception, Isaac's blessing continues to be fulfilled – as if once set in motion, it cannot be repealed.

Whether we like it, understand it, or not, God has bigger plans for Jacob's life. Before Jacob gets out of Palestine on his journey to Haran, he has his first encounter with the Numinous One. We call it a theophany – which means we have no idea what we are talking about, but it is nevertheless a spiritual encounter that changes a person's ideas about reality forever. We call this one "Jacob's Ladder." But whether vision or dream, for Jacob it is truth and reality more certain than anything in this physical realm. In this encounter, God makes promises to Jacob that pick up on the covenant God had made with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather. Jacob's descendants will be like

MAMA'S BOY

the sand of the sea. God will protect and bless Jacob, backing up the blessing his father Isaac had given him. And Jacob responds by giving vows back to God. They are now in business together. *“Whatsoever Thou givest to me, I will give a tenth to Thee.”*

So Jacob continues his journey to Haran, where he runs into Laban, his Uncle – Rebecca’s brother. And Jacob gets a huge taste of what it’s like to deal with a lying, conniving, unprincipled rascal. It’s not as much fun when the shoe is on the other foot.

We skip over most of Jacob’s adventures in Haran. He works seven years to marry Rachel, the great love of his life. But thanks to the deceitful Laban, Jacob wakes up with Leah, Rachel’s sister. It is an experience I only talk about at Men’s Retreats. Then Jacob works another seven years for Rachel, but this time on the buy-now-pay-later plan. Jacob comes into more and more prosperity, despite everything Laban can do to cheat him out of as much as he possibly can. But God is with Jacob, as the covenant at the ladder promised. Quite obviously Jacob is more than a match for Laban, having spent some time learning to be a trickster himself. In any case, Jacob prospers and ends up with many sons; all but one of the twelve are born to him in Haran. Benjamin will be born just outside of Bethlehem as Jacob travels back home toward Hebron, and it will cost the life of Rachel, his true love. He will never fully recover.

Since it can be a bit confusing, let’s stop for a brief refresher on Jacob’s children, and then we will get to our story. Jacob ends up having children with four women: Leah, Zilpah (Leah’s handmaiden), Rachel, and Bilhah (Rachel’s handmaiden). So, adding in the jealousy and the huge emphasis the ancient world put on bearing children, Jacob is kept pretty busy. It still seems clear to me that it was love at first sight between Jacob and Rachel, and that will last all of Jacob’s life, even after Rachel is gone. His great favoritism for Joseph, and later for Benjamin, is mostly in honor of his love for Rachel. At least that’s how I read it.

LEAH

1. Reuben
2. Simeon
3. Levi
4. Judah

9. Issachar
10. Zebulun

ZILPAH

7. Gad
8. Asher

BILHAH

5. Dan
6. Naphtali

RACHEL

11. Joseph
12. Benjamin

These are the twelve sons of Jacob – who become the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's name is later changed to "Israel." So the twelve tribes of Israel are the twelve tribes of Jacob.

And so we go to the second great theophany in Jacob's story, now many years after the first. Jacob is heading from Haran back to Bethel, where he had seen the ladder reaching into Heaven. He has his wives and children with him, endless flocks and herds, and herdsmen and their families to take care of them. Jacob has become one of the most powerful chieftains of his time.

But now Jacob comes into an even more dramatic encounter with God (an angel, God, the Holy Spirit – take your pick). This encounter is described as a wrestling match, and it lasts all night.

How many of you understand from personal experience what's being portrayed here? I do not mean in exact parallel or exact detail, but a struggle over a very significant choice that kept you awake all night, maybe even for many nights. And when you finally became convinced that you knew what you were supposed to do, the mark of the struggle was indelibly imprinted on your consciousness in some way. (A divorce; changing careers; confronting an issue or a person that has your family or your business stymied and stuck.) Some choices set the direction and pattern of our lives for many years to come. Once made, they cannot be unmade, and we can never really know what our lives might have been like if we had made a different choice.

Most people assume that Jacob's wrestle had something to do with his fear of Esau. That has to be true, in my opinion. Twenty years ago, Jacob had run for his life from Esau's wrath. Is Esau still angry? Not only is that a likely possibility, but Jacob has information that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. That is a huge army by the standards of the time. Is Jacob wrestling with whether or not to turn and run? Or maybe to make a run for some different area where he can start over? But if Esau is really angry, will he not just come in pursuit? Jacob cannot travel very fast with this kind of entourage. Flocks and herds and women and children are not a speedy consort.

And where did Esau get so many men? They do funny things with numbers in Genesis. There are no Roman numerals yet, never mind Arabic numerals. And often the numbers are symbolic rather

than literal. Nothing explains to us the people who are said to live for hundreds of years. Oh well. Esau was coming, and it was scary.

Along such lines the story is usually told. And Jacob's strategy – the gifts he strings out between himself and Esau – may be the result of his night of prayer and wrestling with God: a creative plan with which to meet the threat. Very possibly so. You will not go very wrong if this is the way you envision and tell the story. But I get to tell it my way, right? Isn't that the deal?

Jacob's wrestle is not about whether to run or stay. We need to remember that it is God who has told Jacob it is time for him to return to Palestine – time to go home. God has promised to be with him. God has promised to bless and prosper him, and it has certainly been true so far. So what *is* the decision Jacob is wrestling with? I think Jacob is trying to decide whether to come in peace or to come in war. I think Jacob is the most powerful chieftain in the entire region. I think Jacob knows that if he wants to, he can challenge Esau to a fight and win. I think the safest course for Jacob (at least from a human perspective) is to meet the threat head on.

But Jacob has already done Esau great harm. Is he now going to add to it by wounding or killing his brother? I think the wrestle is more profound than most people make it. God's way – or my way? Those are the decisions that baffle us most. Those are the decisions that cost us sleepless nights and cause us to limp for the rest of our lives.

What kind of a man am I? Do I go on harming and maybe killing my brother? Or do I take a huge, very scary, very risky chance and try to *reconcile* with my brother? Am I God's man? Or am I in charge of my own life, now that God has so richly blessed me?

However we tell this story, it is a huge transformation event in Jacob's life. As a result, Jacob's name will be changed from Jacob to Israel. Most of us know that "Islam" means "surrender." We worship God; we bow before God; we obey God. That seems profound and appropriate. That is the way it ought to be for those of us who are religious. But Jacob's new name comes from this wrestling match with God. "Israel" *means* "he strives with God" (*yisra* = he strives with; *el* = God). Why do we not show more respect? Why do we not just do what God wants us to do? Why is our relationship with God so often a profound wrestling match?

When life gets hard, we do not always or easily know what God wants of us. The neophytes may be sure and certain that they know exactly what God wants them to do. They run around saying, "God told me this; God told me that." But for most of us, it is more often a wrestling match. And the guidance comes out of the wrestling. The top ace of our entire tradition was forty days in the wilderness, wrestling with God. Only, Jesus was not playing games; He was not pretending anything. He had just come from His baptism and He needed to know: Who am I? What is my purpose? How can I accomplish what I am being sent to do?

And that was not the end of it. Constant retreats; all night in prayer; going apart to a lonely place. And on the last night of His life, Jesus was still wrestling. "*If it be possible, let this cup pass from me.*" And it is said that His sweat was like drops of blood, so troubled was He.

Only the hypocrites have it easy. Only the pretenders have it all figured out. Israel *means* "he strives with God."

Why does Jacob/Israel limp for the rest of his life? Can we wrestle with God and come away unscathed? Can we wrestle with God and not be changed in some way? If we have no limp, will we forget and go back to the way we were before? Why does Jesus ask us to remember Him every time food or drink passes our lips? Is it possible for anyone to forget the Last Supper, or to forget about the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord? We do it all the time – unless the limp reminds us. Without the love and forgiveness of our Savior, life will revert to what it was – and we will revert to what we were – before we ever knew Him.

Jacob decides to come as a man of peace. Instead of weapons and aggressiveness, he comes with gifts. He sends portions of the flocks and herds ahead as gifts to Esau, so that Esau will have time to ponder what is happening before he and Jacob meet face to face. They are handsome gifts. They are bounty from the birthright and the blessing that Jacob had stolen from Esau. Esau could not have done nearly as well for himself if he had retained the birthright and the blessing. Jacob has skills and gifts beyond the abilities of Esau.

But Esau does not have to acknowledge this. So Jacob is taking a huge risk. Jacob cannot come as a man of peace and as a man of war at the same time. That is what made the wrestling match so hard.

Jacob has spread out his resources – his flocks and herds and fighting men – and if Esau comes in wrath, there will be no protection. Jacob not only risks his own life, but the lives of his wives and children as well, and the lives of all who now count on him for food and safety and protection. And Jacob also risks the purpose and the future God has promised him. If it is a mistake to come in peace, the price will be high indeed: everything will be lost. But Jacob started out by cheating and lying his brother out of birthright and blessing; shall he end by killing him?

Esau, by the way, is very impressive in this story also. He would be justified in keeping his anger. And the way Jacob has played it, Esau could have taken everything. But Esau responds in kind. The brothers are reconciled. They may not be bosom buddies, but they live in peace for the rest of their lives.

So I am enthralled. No way is Jacob the same man we saw coming out of Beersheba many years ago. Now he is a man of great integrity – a man seasoned by many trials and sacrifices. Even though he is extremely wealthy, he is a man of God – a man who lives trusting and trying to please God more than he panders to his own fears or desires. And he is a man willing to take huge risks to obey God, even if it means the possible loss of everything he holds dear – even his own life.

This is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. In fact, this *is* Israel. He is the man who strives with God – but only because he wants to know and do God's will. And he knows how scary it is, if we do not get that right.