

JACOB'S WRSTLING MATCH: WEIRD, BRILLIANT

Did you read the previous article? The one about Jacob's Nightmare? After his mom helped him con his dad out of his brother's blessing, Jacob headed east for parts unknown.

The fir tight away from the old homestead he had a weird dream. The kind of dream that leaves you in a cold sweat. Imagine Jacob's terror when he realized he could not escape from Yahweh, his father's God.

If you think the ladder dream was cute, try another nocturnal encounter. Check out Jacob's wacky wrestling match reported in Genesis 32: 22-32.

The nightmare of the ladder marks the beginning of Jacob's trip away from home. The wrestling incident takes place over twenty years later on his return. You get the impression that Jacob hasn't changed much in those two decades. He is still a tricky, sneaky son-of-a-gun.

During his years away from home he lived with his mother's brother's family. He and his uncle wheeled and dealt with each other.

Jacob married his two cousins, fathered a dozen children (half of them *via* his wives' chamber maids), amassed a respectable herd of sheep, goats and assorted livestock, and finally took off for the west without even saying good-bye.

The closer he came to home and the inevitable reunion with his brother, the more he worried. What if Esau was holding a grudge? Jacob concocted a scheme to pacify his potentially angry sibling. He divided his entourage into thirds and planned to send drove after drove of cattle to Esau as gifts.

That's where Genesis 32 interrupts the story. In the middle of the night Jacob's family and retainers ford the River Jabbok. Then a stranger—unnamed and unannounced—wrestles with him on the bank of the stream.

All night they struggle. But nobody is pinned. Right before dawn the mysterious attacker throws Jacob's hip out of joint and demands to be let go.

"Not unless you bless me," Jacob insists. So the wrestler changes Jacob's name to "Israel." But when Jacob tries to find out his opponent's name, he is ignored. And the sun comes up over the horizon.

So Jacob, alone again, names the spot "Peniel" and limps away.

The whole thing sounds bizarre. Downright spooky. It's the kind of story which hints at more than it says outright. Consider these details:

The Hebrew word for "wrestle" is *jeabeq*, which sounds almost like the name of the river "Jabbok." Jacob's new name, "Israel," sounds like the Hebrew word for "he who struggles with God," which is precisely what the wrestler said.

The name "Peniel" sounds like the Hebrew for "the face of God," which is precisely what Jacob is convinced he has seen.

A footnote to the story says that the descendants of Jacob, also known as Israel, do not eat rump roasts out of respect for Jacob's dislocated hip (although that dietary restriction is not found anywhere else in the Jewish scriptures).

By the way, who was that mysterious stranger? A lone ranger from the neighborhood? A demonic spirit? An angel? God himself? So many details in this story go unexplained, and so many subtle hints are dropped, that it's the kind of tale which challenges your imagination.

That's probably why the biblical author bothered to tell it. He sensed that there is more to history that can be analyzed rationally. Some truths about people and nations can't be explained as much as they can be felt. And this grotesque tale suggests some visceral truth.

The subsequent Israelite people were more like their off-beat ancestor than they cared to admit.

Their whole history, like Jacob's checkered career, was punctuated by stubbornness, trickery, rebellion and outright nastiness. For centuries they kept struggling with God. Nevertheless, it all resulted in a blessing.

The upshot of it all is that a story like Jacob's night time wrestling match gives us present-day readers an insight into the richness of the biblical traditions. Just when we expect a straightforward diary of Jacob's trip home, what we run into is a powerfully evocative story.

It just goes to show. There's some brilliantly strange stuff between the bindings of the ancient scriptures.