8.1. Jacob Wrestling (Genesis 32:22-32)

Marian Kelsey

Genesis [Gen] 32.22-32 is a richly ambiguous text that recounts a nocturnal wrestling match between the patriarch, Jacob, and a mysterious opponent. It has provided resources for many artists, poets and hymn-writers down the centuries, and continues to do so today. In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the wider biblical context and internal ambiguity of the text, with particular attention to the implications of Jacob’s renaming and the enigma of his opponent’s identity. Secondly, I explore appropriations of this famous biblical episode in liturgy, literature, and visual art. Finally, I reflect on the collaboration itself, and on how Dominic de Grande found a way to respond, in an intensely personal way, to the creative potential of this biblical episode.

I. Jacob’s Re-Naming by a Mysterious Opponent.

The passage that describes Jacob’s wrestling match is laconic, but succeeds in prompting a host of questions. Who is Jacob’s opponent? Did Jacob leave in triumph, or barely escape with his life? What is the significance of the blessing Jacob wins and the new name he is given? Such questions have led to the passage being interpreted in many different ways in theological, liturgical and artistic explorations. It is a process that may continue with each new reader of the text:

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless
me.’ So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.\(^1\)

In the wider context of the passage, Jacob is returning home after years of exile. He had fled long before in fear of his brother, Esau, whom he had tricked out of their father’s blessing. Momentarily separated from his family, Jacob is attacked at night by an unknown person. This occurred at the Jabbok, the stream which marked the border of the promised land. Both landscape and plot put Jacob’s status as patriarch of God’s chosen people under threat.

The dangerous situation in which the patriarch found himself seemed at first to resolve triumphantly. Jacob prevailed over his opponent and received from him both a blessing and a new name. Naming and renaming are significant acts in the Bible: when God renames a person, it implies God’s favour.\(^2\) Jacob’s grandfather Abram was similarly renamed when God made a covenant with him (Gen 17.5). Moreover, the narrative contains the first biblical occurrence of the name ‘Israel’. Jacob is thereby confirmed as the father of the people whose story is to follow. Thus, the biblical narrative reaches a climactic moment in which the father of the nation Israel entered the future land of Israel with the favour of God on his side.

Nonetheless, the initial sense of danger was not entirely banished; in fact, with the coming of morning, it arguably grew. Jacob’s unnamed opponent refused to identify himself when Jacob asked, but Jacob reached his own conclusion and declared that he had seen God face to face. Throughout the Bible, seeing God ‘face to face’ implies great intimacy in the encounter, but also a high degree of risk. As God said to Moses: ‘You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live’ (Exodus 33.20).\(^3\) Had Jacob not released his opponent before the dawn, when the veil of darkness would have been removed, the risk might have been too great for him. Despite Jacob’s apparent victory in the struggle, he was left to declare in wonder that his life had been preserved.

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1. Genesis 32.22-32. All biblical quotations in this chapter are taken from the NRSV translation, unless otherwise noted.
3. See also Isa 6.5 for the idea that no-one can see God and live (Rad, p. 323; Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1994), II, p. 297). Alternatively, in Ezek 20.35, the particular description of encountering God ‘face to face’ is associated with the threat of unfavourable judgment. For the intimacy of encounters ‘face to face’, see Exod 33.11, p. 336; also Deut 5.4 and 34.10.
The first impression of God’s favour within the story, furthermore, is not without reservation. Both Jacob’s new name and the implication of land and descendants appear to be provisional at this stage. Neither the narrator nor the other characters use Jacob’s new name in the chapters immediately following. Jacob’s children were still known as the sons and daughter of Jacob (Gen 34.3; 34.7). The narrator continues to address him only as Jacob (Gen 33.1; 35.1). Moreover, the assurance of land and descendants was at best obliquely indicated in the opponent’s renaming and blessing of Jacob. Explicit assurance does not appear until a second encounter some chapters later, in which God appeared to Jacob at Bethel (Gen 35). Here, the (re-)giving of Jacob’s new name was accompanied by an overt promise of the kind traditionally given to the patriarchs: ‘I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you’ (Gen 35.11-12). The uncertain status of Jacob when leaving the Jabbok, and the sense of his life having been spared despite his prevailing, both provide a contrast to the notes of triumph and reassurance inherent in Jacob’s new name.

As it is usually translated, Jacob claims to have seen ‘God’. Similarly, the opponent’s statement is usually rendered ‘you have striven with God’. In each case ‘God’ is being used to translate the Hebrew ʾĕlōhȋm. This Hebrew word, however, can refer to divine beings more generally, including angels or members of a heavenly council, as seen in Job 1.6: ‘One day the heavenly beings (ʾĕlōhȋm) came to present themselves before the LORD.’

It is possible that the same sense of ‘heavenly being’ or ‘angel’ is meant in Gen 32. From the wording alone it cannot be affirmed definitively, then, that Jacob’s opponent is God. The narrator is reticent concerning the identity of Jacob’s opponent and only refers to the opponent as a ‘man’ (Hebrew ʾîš). This is significant; elsewhere in biblical narrative, in every episode of God appearing to one of the patriarchs to assure them of God’s favour, God explicitly identifies himself. To Abraham, God said ‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans’ (Gen 15.7) and ‘I am God Almighty’ (Gen 17.1). To Isaac, God said ‘I am the God of your father Abraham’ (Gen 26.24). Even to Jacob, in other passages when it was clearly God who appeared, God said ‘I am the LORD, the God of
Although some English translations render the term for Jacob’s opponent (‘ĕlōhîm) as ‘God’, the term can also refer to a divine being such as an angel. The narrator simply refers to his opponent as a man (‘îš). Whereas Larrive is suggestive regarding the opponent’s identity in his sculpture Lutte de Jacob et de l’Ange (left), Bonnat heightens the human physicality of the patriarch’s opponent in Jacob Wrestling with the Angels (right). While his wings belie the opponent’s heavenly origins, note his muscular definition and flexion as he wrestles with Adam.
Abraham your father and the God of Isaac’ (Gen 28.3) and ‘I am God, the God of your father’ (Gen 46.3). By contrast, in Gen 32 Jacob’s opponent avoids such self-identification even when asked directly by Jacob (‘Why is it that you ask my name?’).

The mystery figure’s refusal to give a name does bear similarities to an angelic appearance elsewhere in the Bible. In Judges 13 the ‘Angel of the Lord’ appeared to announce the birth of Samson. When Samson’s father-to-be asked the angel his name, the angel refused to give it, using the same words as Jacob’s opponent (in Hebrew): lāmmâ ze tiš’al lišmî. The Angel of the Lord is a puzzling figure who appears occasionally in the Bible. Often, he is not clearly distinguished from God, to the point that it is unclear whether the Angel is merely a messenger or the manifestation of the divine on earth. The Angel of the Lord can speak with divine authority in the first person, but also refers to God in the third person. The danger that is attached to seeing God face to face also attaches to seeing the Angel.

The identity of God and the Angel of the Lord therefore appears to be blurred in several places in biblical literature. This is characteristic of Jacob’s larger story, occurring in Gen 31.11-13 and Gen 48.15-16. In each of these, Jacob referred to the same figure as ‘angel’ and ‘god/God’.

Whatever uncertainty there is concerning the opponent’s identity, the subsequent narrative demonstrates that the favour of God was indeed with Jacob. When the encounter with his estranged brother does occur, it resolves amicably. Jacob fled in fear having stolen a blessing, but returns in peace with a blessing he has won.

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7 See Gen 16.7-14 and Gen 22.1-19. Similar blurring of identity is suggested in Gen 31.10-13, which uses ‘angel of God’ (rather than ‘Angel of the Lord’) in a similar context.
8 See Judg 6.22 concerning Gideon’s encounter with the Angel of the Lord. There is some ambiguity in the narrative, as first the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon (Judg 6.12), and later what seems to be the same figure is referred to as Yahweh (Judg 6.14 and 6.16). However, when Gideon realised that he has encountered a divine being he cried out for help because he had seen ‘the Angel of the Lord face to face’ (Judg 6.22). This suggests that the danger attached to seeing a divine figure applies both to God in person and to the Angel of the Lord.
9 Gen 48.15-16.
10 In addition to the passages already referenced, there is also Exod 3.1-6, Judg 6.19-23 and Judg 13.3-22, and implicitly in Exod 23.20-24 and Josh 13-15 (see discussion in Camilla Heléna von Heijne, The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, Bd. 412 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 49–113).
11 There is also ambiguity elsewhere in the Bible concerning the divine figures whom Jacob encounters. Hosea 12:5 reads: ‘He [Jacob] strove with the angel and prevailed/he wept and sought his favour/he met him at Bethel/and there he spoke with him.’ The phrase ‘he met him at Bethel’ can only refer to Jacob and the angel from earlier in the verse. This might imply that Jacob’s experiences at Bethel, which in the Genesis accounts are indisputably encounters with God, are understood by the author of Hosea to be encounters with an angel. This fluidity of identity even within the various biblical accounts is reminiscent of the passage in Gen 31.11-13 in which the ‘angel of God’ appears to Jacob and declares ‘I am the God of Bethel’. Discussion of this issue can be found in von Heijne, The Messenger of the Lord, 108–10.
12 This has led Hamori to suggest that the blessing stolen under a false name in Gen 27.1-45 was thus ratified by the blessing given under Jacob’s true name in Gen 32.23-33 (Esther Hamori, ‘When Gods
Similarly, although the promise of land and descendants is implicit at best in Gen 32, later chapters confirm it. In Gen 35, God appears to Jacob at Bethel for a second time in the patriarch’s life, reaffirming Jacob’s new name with an explicit promise of land and descendants. Directly afterwards, Rachel gives birth to Benjamin, Jacob’s twelfth and last son. Subsequently, the focus of the biblical narrative shifts from Jacob the patriarch to his twelve sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

II. Appropriations of Jacob’s Wrestling in Art and Worship

Jacob’s encounter with his divine opponent has been the inspiration for many personal and collective reinterpretations of the struggle. In the Revised Common Lectionary, it is set alongside Psalm 17.1-7, 15, in which the psalmist asserts that, were God to visit him by night and test him, no wickedness would be found in him. The psalmist goes on: ‘As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness’ (Psalm 17.15) The juxtaposition of these two passages suggests an interpretation of Gen 32 in which the encounter was intended as a spiritual trial: in granting Jacob a new name and a blessing, God acknowledged that he has passed the test. The liturgical appropriation implies that, like Jacob, those who are righteous will come through their own trials, adversities and temptations, and when they stand before God will be enriched rather than endangered by the encounter. The Lectionary also places Gen 32 alongside the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18.1-8). In this passage, an analogy is established between a widow’s pleas for justice from an unjust judge and someone praying to God for justice. The use of an unjust judge in the place of God in the analogy is quite as startling as the thought of God attacking his chosen patriarch. Yet just as Jacob prevailed over his opponent, so the widow prevailed against the judge. In both of the texts, it is the characters’ persistence — Jacob refusing to release the opponent, and the widow refusing to drop her case — which is eventually rewarded. In the liturgy, then, the congregation is encouraged to take Jacob, as well as the widow, as a model of persistence in both prayer and their lives of faith. In an eighteenth-century hymn by John Newton, for example, the congregation sing: ‘Lord, I cannot let Thee go, / Till a blessing Thou bestow: / Do not turn away Thy face, / Mine’s an urgent, pressing case.’

In the Revised Common Lectionary, the narrative of Jacob wrestling with the divine figure (Gen 32.22-32) is set alongside a prayer for deliverance (Psalm 17.1-7, 15) and the parable of the unjust judge (Lk 18.1-8). After the Psalmist invites God to ‘try my heart’ and ‘visit me by night’ (Psalm 17.3), he writes ‘as for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness’ (v. 15). In the parable, the widow’s persistent petitioning leads the unjust judge finally deciding ‘I will grant her justice’ (Lk 18.5). Resonances in these pairings suggest Jacob’s encounter is a spiritual trial, where God acknowledges his persistence with a new name and blessing. For Christians, Jacob’s struggle has become a model for wrestling with God in faithfulness and prayer.
In several literary explorations of the text as well, Jacob is presented as a model for readers. Jones Very’s ‘Jacob Wrestling with the Angel’ applies Jacob’s experience to the religious lives of contemporary readers. After retelling the story, the poem goes on:

... Deem not that to those ancient times belong The wonders told in history, and in song; Men may with angels now, as then, prevail; Too oft, alas! they in the contest fail. Their blessed help is not from man withdrawn, Contend thou with the angel till the dawn; A blessing he to earth for thee doth bring, Then back to heaven again his flight will wing.

Jacob’s struggle with God is also appropriated as a metaphor for broader descriptions of human struggles with spiritual and emotional crises, as depicted in Rainer Maria Rilke’s ‘Der Schauende‘ [The Beholder] and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘Carrion Comfort’. Hopkins’ poem captures the sense of danger in the biblical text, and places the narrator of the poem side by side with Jacob in wrestling their demons and their gods:

Not, I’ll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee; Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man In me òr, most weary, cry I can no more. I can; Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be. But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me Thy wring-world right foot rock? lay a lionlimb against me? scan With darksome devouring eyes my bruisèd bones? and fan, O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and flee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear. Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod, Hand rather, my heart lo! lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, chéer. Cheer whom though? the hero whose heaven-handling flung me, fót tróð Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one? That night, that year Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God.

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Hopkins’ poem exploits the dramatic dénouement of the biblical narrative. With the coming of morning, the poet, like Jacob, draws the startling conclusion that he has been struggling with God.

Similarly, Emily Dickinson’s poem ‘A Little East of Jordan’ ends with the revelation (at least in Jacob’s mind) that his opponent was God.\(^{16}\) However, Dickinson imitates the biblical narrator’s reticence in otherwise referring to the opponent as an angel. In sharp contrast to Hopkins’ poem, however, the tone of ‘A little East of Jordan’ is light and playful. The Angel wishes to leave for breakfast, and Jacob is left bewildered rather than in fear. The whole encounter is cast as a poet’s retelling of a story, rather than as intense personal reliving of the experience (Hopkins), or as the moralizing self-application urged by Very:

\begin{verse}
A little East of Jordan,
Evangelists record,
A Gymnast and an Angel
Did wrestle long and hard —

Till morning touching mountain —
And Jacob, waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To Breakfast — to return!

Not so, said cunning Jacob!
‘I will not let thee go
Except thou bless me’ — Stranger!
The which acceded to —

Light swung the silver fleeces
‘Peniel’ Hills beyond,
And the bewildered Gymnast
Found he had worsted God!
\end{verse}

Although the struggle between Jacob and his opponent is depicted frequently in visual art, the tendency towards personal application evident in liturgical and poetic explorations is almost entirely absent. Nonetheless, the variety of ways in which artists have appropriated the biblical account is clear. Some of the modern, abstract portrayals are full of jarring lines and colours; these seem intended to reflect the confusion and ambiguity of the biblical account. More often, however, the artist has explored the passage by choosing between the various possible understandings of the text.

\(^{16}\) Atwan and Wieder, *Chapters into Verse*, pp. 95–96.
Jacob’s encounter with the angel is diversely portrayed in art. A few painters and sculptors portray a very physical, forceful fight. Leloir’s *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1865) falls in this category (left). This struggle reflects the initial sense that Jacob’s encounter is fraught with danger. During the struggle, it is far from clear that it will end in blessing. In other artistic portrayals, such as Renoir’s 1695 painting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (c. 1659), the angel is shown with a serene expression as if the struggle is not taxing.
Visual art, perhaps unavoidably, resolves the ambiguity concerning the identity of the opponent, most often depicted straightforwardly as an angel. Given the practical and theological difficulties of representing God, this is unsurprising and does not necessarily constitute an interpretive decision either way. There is more variety in the portrayal of the wrestling itself. A few painters and sculptors portray a physical, forceful fight, such as Alexander Louis Leloir in Jacob Wrestling with the Angel and Jean Larrivé in Lutte de Jacob et de l’Ange. This reflects the initial sense of danger in the biblical narrative, when, during the struggle, it is far from clear that it will end in blessing, and the patriarch seems truly under threat. In other artistic portrayals, including Rembrandt’s Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, the angel is shown with a serene expression, as if the struggle is not taxing. In other cases, the visual representation seems to reflect discomfort at the thought of a divine or angelic person being overpowered by a man, for example in Gustave Doré’s Jacob Wrestling with the Angel, in which the angel calmly holds at arm’s length a seemingly straining Jacob. The biblical narrative itself insists, nonetheless, that the opponent had no difficulty in giving Jacob a serious injury as a memento of their fight, despite having pleaded for release. The serenity of the angel in these portrayals might therefore reflect the precariousness of the situation, as yet unrealized by Jacob. It is noticeable that in numerous artistic representations of the scene the ‘struggle’ looks more like an embrace. These representations include the previously mentioned Rembrandt, Johann Friedrich Glocker’s Kampf Jakobs mit dem Engel, and depictions of the scene in the Haggadah shel Pesaḥ or the ‘Sister Haggadah’ in the British Library, and the mosaics of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo. In such depictions, the multiple layers of the biblical account have arguably found their fullest visual expression. The physical struggle remains, with all the danger that it connotes. However, the audience is also presented with the aftermath beyond the events of Gen 32. The embrace between angel and Jacob, between divine favour and human strength, communicates Jacob’s intimacy with God and the divine protection he experienced through the course of his life.

III. The TheoArtistry Collaboration

When de Grande and I first spoke about the passage, he was interested in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew contains various puns and wordplays that rarely come across in translation, and we discussed the possibility of using some Hebrew in the choral piece. Unfortunately, it was quite difficult for de Grande to write a score using a language unfamiliar to him. After wrestling with the problem for some weeks, de Grande instead decided to set the choral piece in the context of a grandmother telling the story of Jacob to her grandchild at bedtime. He integrated a solo human whistle into the piece, as one of his memories of his own grandmother is of her whistling. Such personal application of the biblical text was pleasing as it fits with how artists and musicians have interpreted it down the centuries. The slightly unearthly quality
of a whistle also provides an atmospheric backdrop to the account of a mysterious nocturnal encounter.

De Grande used Dickinson’s poem as the basis of the words of the choral piece. The story starts gradually and continues to the crucial moment at which the ‘Angel’, as Dickinson introduces him, blesses Jacob. At this point, in a sudden burst of voices, de Grande switches to the biblical text and the opponent’s demand that Jacob release him as dawn is breaking. The outburst from the whole choir at once cuts sharply through the gentle prose of Dickinson, evoking the sense of danger that exists in the biblical text, yet is not prominent in Dickinson’s poem. It marks the turning point in the story from Jacob’s apparent overpowering of his opponent to the realization of the true nature of the situation. It is as if the opponent himself has stepped out of the piece and spoken directly to the listeners. Afterwards, de Grande returns to the words of Dickinson and her gentler tone. The movement back to the poem seems to reflect the aftermath of the encounter in the Bible, where only Jacob is aware of the nocturnal events and their significance. For Jacob, however, the encounter shapes his life. The piece ends by softly musing on Jacob’s realization that the opponent he has fought is none other than God.

Gen 32 provides deep resources for theological and artistic exploration. It is the first appearance in biblical narrative of the name ‘Israel’. It comes at the moment when the ancestors of that nation are entering the land promised to them. The story thereby contains the first steps in the span of Judeo-Christian history which follows. At the same time, the multi-layered uncertainties of the passage — danger or blessing, wrestling or embrace, God or angel — resist assimilation into any smooth recounting of the tale. Hence, the passage has been appropriated in many different ways in liturgy, literature and art. It has especially lent itself to personal re-application. When faced with a confusing and uncertain situation, Jacob stubbornly persisted in the pursuit of a blessing. Like Jacob, those in search of God’s blessing often struggle with ambiguous or elusive experiences. They, too, may find resolve through clinging on, even when that to which they cling is trying its best to escape. De Grande’s choral piece continues in the tradition of personal applications of the story, while also bringing out much of the richness of a text that resists simplistic interpretation. Hopefully, there will be many more explorations to come.