

Exegetical Paper

22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." 29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." 31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon. Genesis 32:22-32n (NIV)

Introduction

This is a very famous and well known passage with a variety of different theologians attempting to explain the significance of Jacob's encounter. While there are numerous difficulties presented by this passage, ultimately it is the story of God's faithfulness to man in spite of our weaknesses and circumstances. Frederick Buechner illustrates Jacob's encounter as "the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God" (Buechner, 1985, p. 18).

Difficulties in Textual Interpretation

Genesis 32, in particular, is typically understood as a pericope, a theological narrative. Yet it is a narrative that is wrought with a lot of ambiguity and sometimes frustrating lack of clarity in the literary details (Jones, 2012). There are numerous interpretations of the various elements of Jacob's encounter at Peniel. First, there are questions about the nature of the event itself. There have been a number of different explanations which suggest that the events of Genesis 32 might have only been a spiritual struggle. Others believed it to be a description of a long and earnest prayer. Still others insist that the wrestling match was in fact a real physical match since Jacob suffered the consequence of a physical disability after the encounter (Keil, C.F. and Delitzsch, F. (1885), as cited in Vawter, n.d.)

To add to the mystery of this expository is the issue of Jacob's opponent. Was it really God in a mysterious incarnate form? The actual identity of the opponent is not clear, yet Jacob himself recognizes his opponent as God once he is defeated (Gerard, V.R. as cited in Vawter ,n.d.). That the man was actually God himself is declared first of all by Jacob in v. 30, and there are many authors who support this. Yet others believe that the text states that since Jacob physically saw someone face to face, the opponent was neither an ordinary man nor God himself, but rather a messenger acting on behalf of God, like some type of angel since the OT regularly refers to the Angel of the Lord when describing a theophany (Jones. L, 2012).

Aside from these difficult questions about this there are several significant takeaways from this pericope. First, is the notion that God blesses despite Jacob's morally complex character. In the beginning of Genesis 32 Jacob was on the run from Esau and his army because of his past deception. Up until now one cannot really argue that Jacob had led a moral and

righteous life. Yet after the night of wrestling Jacob receives the blessing of God. The wrestling match changes him and the trajectory of his life (Koenig, 2010).

It is also quite significant that the opponent could not initially prevail and thus wounds/strikes Jacob. Yet Jacob does not give up and continues to wrestle despite the opponent asking to be let go before daybreak. Why would God simply not overpower Jacob, or why couldn't he prevail initially? God's power is demonstrated through weakness. Perhaps this pericope is a way of revealing God's character to be one of patience and willingness to allow humanity to make their own choice, even if it means to disobey and reject God. God comes down to meet Jacob where he's at, alluding to the incarnation where God descends to move toward humanity. In addition, although the text centers upon an individual, it is also about the nation of Israel. This grappling match characterizes Jacob and Israel's relationship with God (Jones, L., 2012).

Finally, another significant point is the wounding of Jacob. The blessing only occurs after an intense wrestling match. According to Brugemann as cited in Carpenter, one of the points of the story is that you don't get the blessing without getting wounded, and that even God's unconditional love for Jacob actually winds up costing Jacob something physically. This encounter seems to allude to the notion of Cruciform love, where love is ultimately found in the wounding (Brueggemann, W., as cited in Carpenter 2022).

Applications

This text is a reminder of several integral parts of the spiritual journey. One is how easily we can recognize ourselves in Jacob's story. Our struggle with sin, fear, darkness, loneliness, vulnerability, emptiness, exhaustion, and pain. It's also a reminder of how God works through and despite our weakness. The very struggles and weaknesses become the means of God's redemptive and transformative work in us.

We also learn that God works in mysterious ways. Whether or not one interprets the text literally or metaphorically, the text is shrouded in mystery and not all questions and details can be answered with certitude. We all experience times when we feel as if we are wrestling with God. This text reminds us that God is willing and able to meet us where we are at and wrestle with us, and to help us grow in that process.

References

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