

Jacob's Wrestling

Important Scenes of Identity

Jacob identifies himself as Esau

Genesis 27: 18: Jacob “went in to his father and said, ‘My father.’
And he said, ‘Here I am. Who are you, my son?’
Jacob said to his father, ‘**I am Esau your firstborn.**’”

Archetypal Journey: As readers, we follow Jacob, the one who must leave the familiar to venture into the unknown, where his own identity will be developed through blessed and crucible experiences.

Important Scenes of Identity

God identifies Himself to Jacob

When Jacob lays down to rest on the stone and has a dream of the “angels of God ascending and descending” on the ladder, God stands above it and names His identity:

“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.” He then gives a promise that the land where Jacob lies will be given to him and his offspring. It is similar to God’s promise to Abraham of many descendants, like the dust of the earth. And God promises to be with Jacob and not leave him.

Jacob responds, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord will be my God.”

Important Scenes of Identity

Jacob's identity with the man (later in Scripture referred to as angel)

“And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his 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 has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’”

(This passage sounds much like Esau's plea to Issac to receive a blessing. He did not want to leave his father until he received at least one blessing from him.)

“And [the man] said to Jacob, **‘What is your name?’** And he said, **‘Jacob.’**

Then he said, **‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.’**

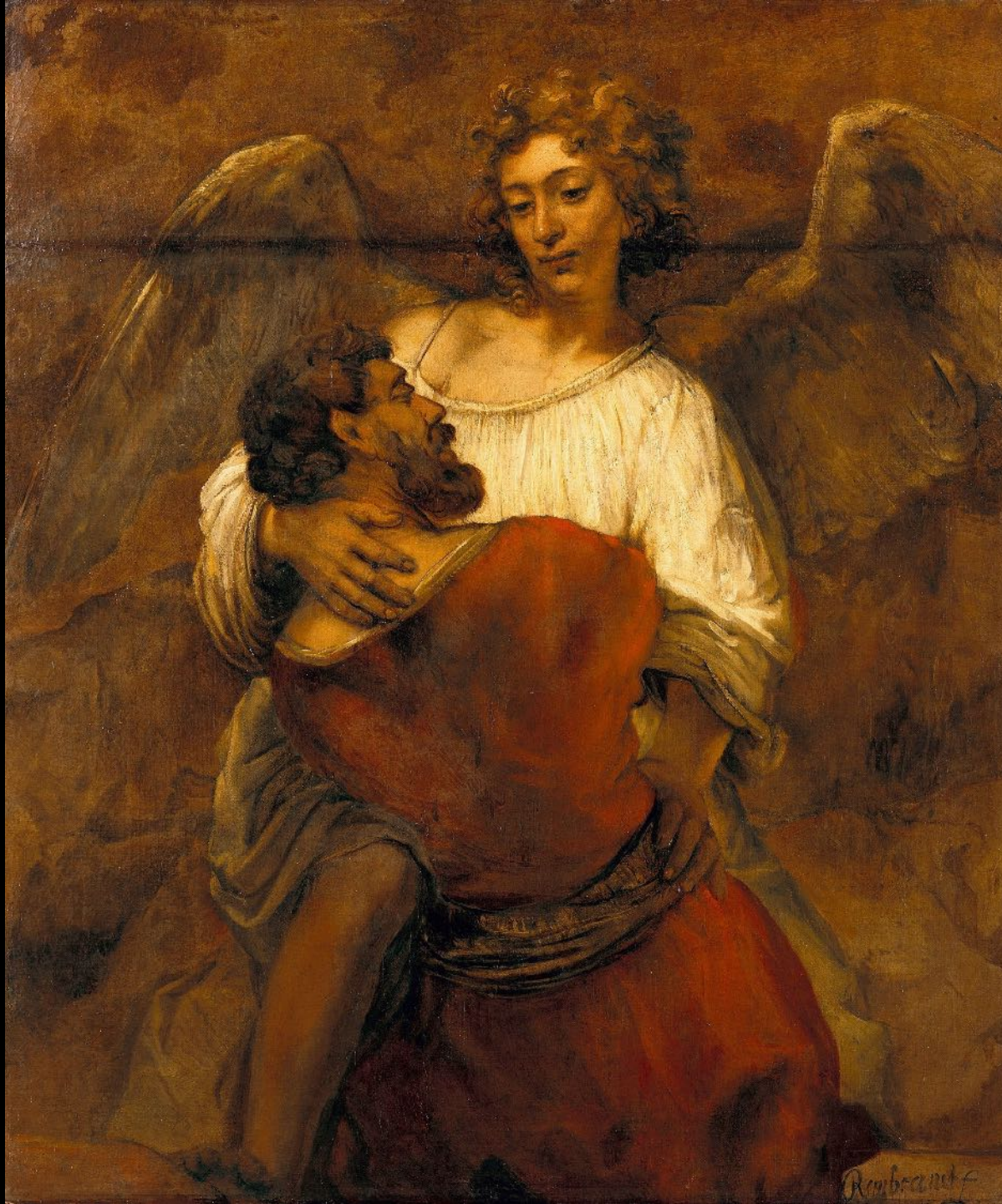
Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you asked my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel [face of God], saying, ‘For I have seen **God face to face**, and yet my life has been delivered.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.”

The renaming of Jacob as a name God has given him suggests an identity linked with God's covenant to Abraham.

Interpretation of “the man” as angel/God

The “man” has often been understood to be an angel based on the passage in Hosea 12:

Speaking of Jacob, it says, “In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel...”



Jacob
Wrestling with
the Angel
by Rembrandt

Oil on canvas,
1659



*Jacob
Wrestling with
the Angel*
by Alexandre-
Louis Leloir
(French)

1865



Jacob Wrestling the Angel
by Leon-Joseph-Florentin
Bonnat

Pencil and black chalk on
paper

1876



Jacob Wrestling with the Angel by Odilon Redon (French)
Oil on canvas
1905-1910
Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.



Jacob Wrestling
with the Angel
By Jean Larrive
(French)

1920



*Jacob Wrestling
with the Angel*
by Frederick
Taubes

Oil on canvas,
1944

At Nelson-
Atkins in Kansas
City



*Jacob Wrestling
with the Angel*
by Marc Chagall

Color lithograph
on Arches script
watermarked
paper,
1967

23/100

Marc Chagall



*Woodcut of Jacob
wrestling with God*
by Walter Habdank
(Germany)

from
the Habdank[German]
Bibel, 1995

Paintings of Jacob and Esau after Jacob's wrestling encounter

Genesis 28: *"Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, 'The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.'"*

Genesis 33: *"But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept."*

--a kind of Eucatastrophe, the sudden turn of grace from the dark thing that could happen (an expectation of death) but turns into unexpected reconciliation (perpetuation of life)! This experiences turns out very differently from Cain and Abel.

Note: Walter Brueggemann and others have considered the possibility of the figure as Esau or Jacob's fear



Meeting of Jacob and Esau
by Cornelis Cornelisz (Netherlands)
Oil wood on panel,
1594

Displayed at Princeton University Art Museum



Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau by Johann Heinrich, oil on canvas, 1634
In the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna



Jacob and Esau
by George
Frederick Watts
(England)

1881



Meeting of Jacob and Esau
By Francesco Hayez

Oil on canvas,
1844
Painted in Italy



*The
Reconciliation
of Jacob and
Esau,*

Artists unknown
from the Italian
Art School

Date unknown



The Meeting of Jacob and Esau by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (French),

Guache on board, 1896-1902

In the Jewish Museum in New York City

Echoes or Contrasts from earlier scene of Jacob and Isaac

- Isaac was in darkness from blindness and could not see Jacob's face, and Jacob encounters the figure in the dark. Both are uncertain who is before them. Does Jacob, then, have an opportunity for empathy?
- The repeated use of the word "face" contrasts Jacob's earlier disguise. The word "face" is used six times in close proximity, a significance of revelation contrasting trickery or deception. Jacob also says his name rather than calling himself "Esau."
- Now when Jacob receives the blessing, it is not by Rebekah's prompting but through his own desire to not let go until he has the blessing. Jacob has had an encounter with God that makes him more aware Who is giving the blessing. Now, he is not before his father but with a figure of God.
- Instead of taking a blessing from Esau, Jacob insists on giving his brother the animals and goods he sent to him, even though Esau says he has enough (implying he has been blessed too).

From *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century* from the chapter “Jacob Wrestling” by Marian Kelsey

“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.**”

Some ways people have applied this passage

- God is present in the wrestling of fears and human vulnerabilities. This wrestling invites human agency in the struggle.
 - Some have interpreted Jacob wrestling with his conscience, which we can apply to our own wrestlings. (See quote from John Donne's sermon.)
- A model of persistence in faith, not letting go until receiving a blessing.
 - Readers consider themselves in the place of Jacob, as Gerard Manley Hopkins does in his poem "Carrion Comfort," Christina Rossetti in "Alas, my Lord," or both Charles Wesley and John Newton do in their hymn lyrics. Wesley and Newton depict the figure as Christ.

Excerpts of Jacob in hymns by Wesley and Newton: interpreting the figure as Christ

Charles Wesley's "Wrestling Jacob"

Come, O thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with thee;
With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day...

In vain that strugglest to get free,
I never will unloose my hold!
Art thou the Man that died for me?
The secret of thy love unfold;
Wrestling, I will not let thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know...

Sung to Scottish tune "Candler" by the 70 X7 Band

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrs4y4IK46Q>

Sung in folk song genre by Tim Ericksen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jXfiwcGF3Q&t=44s>

John Newton's "Nay, I Cannot Let Thee Go"

Nay, I cannot let Thee go,
Till a blessing Thou bestow:
Do not turn away Thy face,
Mine's an urgent, pressing case...

Thou hast helped in every need;
This emboldens me to plead;
After so much mercy past,
Canst Thou let me sink at last?

No—I must maintain my hold,
'Tis Thy goodness makes me bold;
I can no denial take,
When I plead for Jesu's sake.

Emily Dickinson's "East of Jordan" (lighter, more playful tone)

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!

This poem was set to choral music
by Dominic de Grande (2017) and
performed by the St. Salvato's
Chapel Choir

<https://artandtheology.org/2020/07/28/a-little-east-of-jordan-artful-devotion/>

The composition has varied musical
tones of mystery, danger, and
surprise. At times, a soloist conveys
the aloneness of Jacob.

Christina Rosetti “Alas, my Lord” (1862)

Alas my Lord,
How should I wrestle all the livelong night
With Thee my God, my Strength and my Delight?

How can it need
So agonized an effort and a strain
To make Thy Face of Mercy shine again?

How can it need
Such wringing out of breathless prayer to move
Thee to Thy wonted Love, when Thou art Love?

Yet Abraham
So hung about Thine Arm outstretched and bared,
That for ten righteous Sodom had been spared.

Yet Jacob did
So hold Thee by the clenched hand of prayer
That he prevailed, and Thou didst bless him there.

Elias prayed,
And sealed the founts of Heaven; he prayed again
And lo, Thy Blessing fell in showers of rain.

Gulped by the fish,

As by the pit, lost Jonah made his moan;
And Thou forgavest, waiting to atone.

All Nineveh
Fasting and girt in sackcloth raised a cry,
Which moved Thee ere the day of grace went by.

Thy Church prayed on
And on for blessed Peter in his strait,
Till opened of its own accord the gate.

Yea, Thou my God
Hast prayed all night, and in the garden prayed
Even while, like melting wax, Thy strength was made.

Alas for him
Who faints, despite Thy Pattern, King of Saints:
Alas, alas, for me, the one that faints.

Lord, give us strength
To hold Thee fast, until we hear Thy Voice
Which Thine own know, who hearing It rejoice.

Lord, give us strength
To hold Thee fast until we see Thy Face,
Full Fountain of all Rapture and all Grace.

But when our strength
Shall be made weakness, and our bodies clay,
Hold Thou us fast, and give us sleep till day.

“Carrion Comfort” (1885) by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man
In me ór, 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 bruised 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, fóot tród
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.

John Donne, 17th century poet and dean of St. Paul's cathedral

Donne discusses the story of Jesus visiting Mary and Martha and Jesus commenting that Mary has chosen better by being at the feet of Jesus, near and alone with Him.

“Must I be concluded with that, that Moses *was commanded to come near the Lord alone*; that solitariness, and dereliction, and abandoning of others, disposes us best for God, who accompanies us most alone? May I not remember, and apply too, that though God came not to Jacob till he found him alone, yet when he found him alone, he wrestled with him, and lamed him; that when, in the dereliction and forsaking of friends and physicians, a man is left alone to God, God may so wrestle with this Jacob, **with this conscience**, as to put it out of joint, and so appear to him as that he dares not look upon him face to face...But a *faithful friend is the physic of life, and they that fear the Lord shall find him*. Therefore hath the Lord afforded me both in one person, that physician who is my faithful friend.”

The One who wounds also heals; the One who contends may be a faithful friend.

Esau mentioned in Scripture

Old Testament

In Deuteronomy 2, the Lord tells the Israelites not to contend with Esau's descendants "for I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as for the sole of the foot to tread on, because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession."

Yet in later Old Testament passages, language is used about Esau's family such as In Obadiah: "The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble; they shall burn them and consume them, and there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau, for the LORD has spoken."

And in Malachi: "'I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated."

New Testament (Esau mentioned in only two verses)

Hebrews 11: 20: "By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau."

Hebrews 12: 16-17: "that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears."