



# Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

## Jacob's struggle

*"Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29).*

The Genesis story of Jacob's wrestling match with a mysterious man is a minefield of symbols to be interpreted humanly and religiously. To grasp this text we need to see it in the context of the story of Jacob's reunion with his brother Esau. Jacob, together with his household, is heading home after a twenty year sojourn outside the God-given land of Canaan. Along the way he learns that his brother Esau, together with 400 men, is coming to meet him. Fearful that Esau still harbors murderous rage over a long-ago conflict, Jacob prepares for the worst (32:4-22). The night before the two brothers meet Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man, thought to be a divine representative (Gen. 32:23-33). And what happens the next day?

*"Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him...he kissed him; and they wept" (33:4).*

Esau's reaction is startling. Last time they were together Esau was out to kill Jacob. Now he shows nothing but love toward his brother who deceived him all those years ago (Gen. 27). Could the events of the night before have had something to do with this dramatic change of heart? Jewish interpretative traditions<sup>1</sup> certainly think so, in some cases viewing

Jacob's wrestling partner to be 'the ministering angel of Esau.' Before Jacob is ready to meet Esau in the flesh, he has to undergo a spiritual confrontation.

While there are multiple ways to approach this text, one is to explore it from a psychological angle. Thus Jacob is seen to be wrestling with his personal history, anxieties, guilt. The blessing he grasps is the blessing of having endured a crisis, confronted his inner demons and matured in the process. In this view, Jacob emerges a new person: free from fear, at peace with himself and those around him. Esau senses this, it disarms him, and reconciliation is possible.

Does this interpretation speak to you? Was there a time when you wrestled amidst crisis, 'alone', 'in the night' and came through a stronger, wiser, mature person?

There is another strong current in Jewish interpretation: one which relates Jacob's ordeal to the struggle of the Jewish people in coming to terms with the fact of their election by God. After all, wouldn't it be easier to fit in with society; to *not* be identified by circumcision or Shabbat or dietary practices? It would certainly have saved them centuries of persecution, sorrow.

Yet struggle is part of fidelity. To live the Torah means to strive for the ways of God; not settling for moral mediocrity nor despairing of the possibility of a transformed earth. Yes, it can mean wounds that at times produce a limp. But

it also holds the priceless blessing and responsibility of belonging to God and God's people.

In today's complex political climate there are many who are quick to judge the Jewish people. Yet Israel itself has aplenty its critics and prophets within, and this too forms part of its struggle. Certainly Jacob's story invites us to wonder at the fact that through history the Jewish people have struggled against extraordinary odds, and have prevailed again and again to grasp anew the irrevocable blessing of their God-given identity and calling.

It is vital for Christians to ponder this biblical moment when God's choice of Abraham finds new expression in Jacob. It is vital for understanding Judaism, Jesus' Jewishness, as well as our own call to 'be' church—not replacing the Jewish covenant which (as the church teaches) remains valid, but rather learning from its enduring truth.

As Pope John Paul said on a visit to Sydney (26 Nov 1986):

*"For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with an irrevocable calling." •*

1. Sources: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006); Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem, 2009). Scripture: NJPS.