

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

Jacob's Ladder and Jacob's Wrestling

JACOB'S CHARACTER offers such contradictions and contrasts as that of no other of the patriarchs.

There seems to be a unity in the character of Abraham and even of Isaac that we do not find in Jacob. It is especially in comparison with Esau, his twin brother, that Jacob comes out second best from the human standpoint.

James Russell Lowell is not alone in preferring Esau. At the age of twenty he wrote: "**Bless me, even me also, O my father!**" What a passage in the Bible that is! I never could and never can read it without tears in my eyes. Esau was the favorite to my boyish soul, and is still. I had a fellow-feeling for him, for he was a careless, scatter-brained, uncalculating sort of fellow, in which respect some others are born into the world like him." [1]

Yet Jacob, with all his glaring faults of character, his deceit and self-seeking, his waywardness, even after GOD's call, and his constant attempts to further his own interests, was the child of promise and of the covenant.

His name, Jacob, in popular etymology, signified the *supplanter* or the *heeler*. But, as some scholars affirm, the name is rather related to a South Arabian or Ethiopic root, Akaba, *he whom (GOD) guards or protects*. Born when his father was sixty years old, he became a quiet, inoffensive man, dwelling in tents, as shepherd.

He was the favorite of his mother Rebekah, while his father preferred Esau.

One day Esau came in from hunting, faint with hunger. Jacob happened to have a pottage of lentils ready boiled, but he offered hospitality to his brother only when he had compelled him to sell his birthright. Later there was positive fraud at the instigation of his mother, Rebekah. Isaac at the time was over one hundred and thirty years old and nearly blind. Jacob, dressed in Esau's raiment with his hands and neck made artificially hairy, impersonated his brother and at his father's bed-side lied to obtain the primogeniture blessing from the patriarch. It is an ugly story of deceit; but all is so true to life and to man's sinful nature that Jacob's dealings have become a proverb. GOD over-ruled all for His purpose.

Jacob incurred Esau's righteous wrath after this second wrong and he resolved that when his father died, he would kill his brother (ch. 27:1-41). At the end of the story, however, we see Esau reconciled to Jacob and both of them present at Isaac's funeral (ch. 35:29). The reconciliation of the brothers seems to have been permanent.

It is not our purpose here to delineate the character of Esau or of Jacob, but to point out that, with all his faults, Jacob was a man of prayer and that in two crises of his checkered life he had a vision of GOD.

It is not the virtues of Jacob that receive emphasis in the Old Testament narrative, but his reliance on GOD and GOD's grace bestowed on one who himself felt his unworthiness.

"Blessed is the man who hath the God of Jacob for his help"

That is the keynote to the number of references to Jacob in the Bible. Under his twofold name, Jacob and Israel, we find three hundred and sixty references to him in the Old and New Testaments. In more than twenty-eight of the sixty-six books, his name is recorded. The personal name became a proper name for the whole of the Chosen race and today the Jews themselves have named their promised land, Israel.

Before we see Jacob at Bethel or at Peniel - the two great crises in his life - let us refresh ourselves, as our Saviour did, at Jacob's Well. No other patriarch has had so enduring and so noble a monument.

How well I remember the day I drank of its sweet water when I visited Palestine. It is at Sychar, near the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son, Joseph (John 4:5, 6,12; Genesis 33:18-20).

Tradition, going back as far as 333 A.D. and accepted by Jews, Christians and Mohammedans, agrees with the woman of Samaria that from this well "**Jacob and his sons and his cattle drank.**" It is one of the best authenticated holy sites in all Palestine. The mouth of the well is cut out of one stone (now horribly disfigured by an ugly iron contrivance for drawing up water). The depth of the well is eighty feet and the diameter nine feet. [2]

When one stands by such an ancient well and recalls its history, he can agree with Ernest Renan that "Palestine is the fifth gospel."

Nor can we forget that it was GOD's covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob which, fulfilled in CHRIST, makes it a Holy Land to Christians.

I. Jacob's Ladder is one of the most remarkable pictures William Blake drew in water-color, with fertile imagination behind a skillful brush. The youth lies asleep on a hill-top, his shepherd's crook in his hand.

"Ending by his pillow and descending from a vast golden sun on high, whence emanate floods of bright yellow beams, is a white spiral stairway or ladder, upon which countless angels and girls and little children are passing up and down. Foremost among them is a winged angel bearing a basket of bread upon his head, followed by a damsel with a jug of wine. Others are engaged in various delights; embracing one another, leading little children, one carrying a scroll, others a book, compasses, or a musical instrument - all joyful and beautiful. Beneath the rays of the sun is deep blue sky, star-spangled." [3]

That is the interpretation of a mystic and poet as well as an artist.

The simple words of Genesis have, however, fascinated artist and poet alike. Here they are.

"And Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed and behold, a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham, thy father, and of Isaac; the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it and to thy seed; And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of" (Genesis 28:10-15).

It is on these six verses that Sarah Flower Adams wrote (1840) what someone has called one of the greatest Christian hymns and one of the best beloved:

"Nearer my GOD to Thee, Nearer to Thee."

Every stanza is a picture of the lonely exile, the sun gone down, lying with his head on a stone and yet seeing angels beckoning and ever drawing nearer and nearer on the steps that lead to heaven. Until "with joyful wing cleaving the sky" Jacob flies upward and we, with Jacob, reach the top of the ladder and see GOD face to face.

The hymn is a great interpretation of the dream of Jacob and has had a great history.

But we have a clearer insight into the dream of Jacob in the words of our Saviour to Nathanael (John 1:51):

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Our Jacob's ladder is the Son of Man resting in His humanity on the earth close to each believer and in His deity reaching beyond earth to the throne of His glory and majesty.

Francis Thompson, in his poem *The Kingdom of GOD*, has two beautiful references to the ladder of Jacob and brings it close to each of us.

"The angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces
That miss the many-splendored thing.
. . . Upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross."

Bethel was the name Jacob gave to the place where he raised the stone of remembrance - the House of GOD. How many tabernacles, churches, and hospitals across the wide world bear that beautiful name! And the place itself became famous in the later history of Israel. First, as sacred to the Lord, and afterwards, alas, under King Jeroboam as a center of idolatry (I Kings 13:1-32).

And as for the stone itself, which was Jacob's pillow, that also, by a strange superstition, became famous; it is called the "stone of destiny" on which the monarchs of Scotland and England were crowned. Here is the story as told in the history of Scotland. [4]

John Hill Burton, in his history of Scotland, tells how King Edward I took away from the Abbey of Scone the Stone of Destiny - the palladium of Scotland.

"It was enshrined in a chair or throne, on which the kings of Scots were wont to be crowned. Its legendary history was that it was the pillow on which Jacob reposed when he saw the vision of the angels ascending and descending the ladder, and that it was brought over by Scota, that daughter of Pharaoh from whom the Scots line of monarchs was descended. In terms of a prophetic couplet, it was its virtue that wherever it might be placed there would the Scots be supreme; and it will easily be believed that the prophecy was recalled when, in after days, the monarchs of the Stewart dynasty sat on it to be crowned in Westminster . . . King Edward was a serious prince, according to the notions of the age, and much given to relic-worship. He chose a spot sacred by its uses, and by the presence of his own household gods, for the reception of the great relic - the achievement of his sword and spear. It was in the chapel built by his father, containing the shrine of Edward the Confessor - where his loved Queen Eleanor and his father were buried, and where he then desired that his own dust should be laid. He intended at once to enclose the relic in a shrine, which should be the coronation chair of the kings. At first he gave orders for a chair of bronze, then altered his intention, and had it made of wood. Its cover or shrine thus being a seat or throne, altered and adorned from age to age, became the coronation chair of the kings of England."

Would Jacob in his wildest dreams ever have thought of his anointed Bethel stone becoming the sacred relic of the British Empire?

II. Wrestling Jacob.

Great is the contrast between Jacob at Bethel and Jacob at Peniel. In both cases we may be assured the vision he saw and the encounter with GOD was in the realm of prayer. For true prayer is a ladder to heaven with two-way traffic; but it is also a wrestling-place with GOD. And strange to say, that even as the "Stone of Destiny" leads us back to Jacob's ladder, so the end of Jacob's wrestling with the Angel brings us back to his injured thigh and the sinew which became taboo to the Israelites (Genesis 32: 32).

When I visited the small colony of Jews in Kaifung, China, in 1917, I was astonished to learn that the Chinese character for Jew was "pluck-out-sinew-folk."

So for all these centuries and even in central China the closing verse of the story of Peniel found corroboration.

"Therefore, the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank."

What a wonderful story it is!

"And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

The whole of the thirty-second chapter deals with Jacob after he left Laban and was on his way to meet his estranged brother, Esau. He had again a vision of angels and called the place Mahanaim - i.e., two hosts, two camps; that of Jacob with his large family and flocks and the angels that camped round about him. But his faith was weak and his heart failed him, so he planned by strategy to win Esau's favor who came like a warrior with four hundred followers. He divided his small company (vv. 7-8); he humbled his heart, praying GOD for mercy and deliverance.

"Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau: for I fear him lest he come and smite me and the mother with the children."

And he also realized his great loneliness as he recalled the past.

"I am not worthy of all thy mercies . . . with my staff I passed over this Jordan and now I am become two bands."

And then, after he had distributed among his company the generous peace-offering for a present to Esau, we read:

"And Jacob was left alone and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

Hosea, in later days, spoke of Jacob as wrestler from his birth:

"He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and by his strength he had power with God: Yea, he had power over the angel and prevailed; he wept and made supplication unto him: He found him in Bethel and there He spake with us, even the Lord the God of hosts; the Lord is his memorial" (Hosea 12:3-5).

It was Jacob's encounter with GOD - GOD in the form of an angel; wrestling and finding his weakness and his strength at the same time.

"What is thy name? . . . I will not let thee go except thou bless me."

He was the type of all those who wrestle in prayer with GOD, of those who in loneliness and at their own wits end, find GOD sufficient. As Christina Rossetti says:

"Weeping we hold Him fast who wept
For us. We hold Him fast;
And will not let Him go except
He bless us at the last."

The place where Jacob wrestled is perhaps one of the loneliest and weirdest corners of that land of surprises, Palestine. An orientalist and geographer, Nelson Glueck, describes a night he spent there alone, and his meditations.

"Twenty years had elapsed since Jacob had seen Esau and now his face turned homeward . . . I have slept out overnight on Tell-edh-Dhahab (the "*Hill of Gold*"), which is probably to be identified with Penuel. The canyon walls widen out considerably at this point, as the hills, through which the Jabbok cuts its way, begin to tumble down toward their meeting place with the Jordan Valley. The rushing little stream bends around the base of this hill on three sides, and in flood season cuts it off altogether from the mainland, as if to say, 'This is a particularly important place, not to be associated with the ordinary mundane world.' From the top of the hill there is a good view over the Jordan Valley and across it to the hills of Palestine. Some sense of sanctity still hovers over this place. My Arab companions were very loathe to have me sleep there alone, but would on no condition accompany me there to spend the night. They made their camp at the foot of the hill, warning me that if I persisted in my intention to sleep on top of it, a spirit (*jinni*) would seize me during the night, and that if indeed I did survive the ordeal I would wake up in the morning *majnun*, that is, possessed by the spirit. But here Jacob had wrestled during the night with his Adversary, being left alone only at the break of dawn. And here I would sleep or sit out the night, with the living past breathing its vivid tale into my ears. What would happen to me before I crossed the Jordan again? What are those sounds? The sighs of Jacob, the accents of Esau? Dawn had come. My Arabs had been shouting to me to come down, concerned for my safety." [5]

But it is not the desolate loneliness of Jacob and of that environment that moves us most deeply. It is the struggle in Jacob's soul-and in our own souls-when we meet GOD face to face. Only the sublime hymn by Charles Wesley (which, alas, is seldom found in hymnals) gives us the right interpretation. Read it. And then read it again; and pray:

"Come, O Thou Traveller 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.

"I need not tell Thee who I am,
My misery, or sin declare,
Thyself hast call'd me by my name,
Look on thy hands, and read it there,
But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou?
Tell me thy name, and tell me now.

"In vain Thou 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.

" 'Tis all in vain to hold thy tongue,
Or touch the hollow of my thigh:
Though every sinew be unstrung,
Out of my arms Thou shalt not fly;
Wrestling I will not let Thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

"My strength is gone, my nature dies,
I sink beneath thy weighty hand,
Faint to revive, and fall to rise;
I fall, and yet by faith I stand,
I stand, and will not let Thee go,
Till I thy name, thy nature know.

"Yield to me now – for I am weak;
But confident in self-despair:
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak,
Be conquer'd by my instant prayer,
Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move,
And tell me, if thy name is Love.

" 'Tis Love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me,
I hear thy whisper in my heart.
The morning breaks, the shadows flee:
Pure Universal Love Thou art,
To me, to all, thy bowels move,
Thy nature, and thy name is Love."

1 *Letters of James Russell Lowell*, Vol. I, p. 44.

2 *Handbook of Palestine and Transjordan* by Henry C. Luke.

3 A. G. B. Russell, **The Letters of William Blake**, p. 31.

4 John Hill Burton, *History of Scotland*, Vol. II, pp. 171-175.

5 *The River Jordan*, p. 112, 117.

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