



People of the Old Testament

Jacob the Wrestler

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Genesis 32: 22–end Matthew 16: 13–20

In the late summer of 1888 one troubled genius, Paul Gauguin, sat down to write to another, Vincent van Gogh. He said as follows,

I have just painted a religious picture, very badly done but it interested me and I like it. ... A group of Breton women are praying, their costumes very intense black. The coifs very luminous yellowy-white. The two coifs to the right are like monstrous helmets. ... I think I have achieved in the figures a great simplicity, rustic and superstitious. The whole thing is very severe.

The painting to which Gauguin referred is called *The Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* and you can see a copy of it in the order of service. Incidentally, one place you can't see the picture is the church at Pont Aven, where Gauguin painted it. The artist told van Gogh that he had offered the painting to the church but that, as he put it, "Naturally, they don't want it." Gauguin's work now fetches tens of millions of dollars per painting, so if you remember only one thing from this sermon, perhaps it should be never to look a gift horse in the mouth.

1888 was a period of some turmoil in Gauguin's life. He had become immensely unsatisfied with the impressionist school of painting on the basis that its focus on natural realism explored through the variation of light neglected the realms of the spiritual and of the idea, both crucial aspects of human experience. *Vision after the Sermon* was a statement break with impressionist technique and the start of a new style of synthetism, representing a scene on a flat surface with bold blocks of colour designed not to represent an image with photographic accuracy but, by suppressing the real, to allow the emotional, the spiritual, one might almost say the magical, to emerge out of experience. In this picture, Gauguin's experience of watching the Breton women leave church on a Sunday in their traditional dress is set in relation with the biblical vignette of Jacob's wrestling match with a mystery man. By making both halves of the image flat, Gauguin allowed the everyday to meld into the world of dreams. This was not only artistic innovation but a stand against post enlightenment spiritual scepticism and what might loosely be called progress.

Whether Gauguin thought that the cultural battle on which he had embarked was unwinnable in western Europe is debatable: he had been attracted to Brittany in the first place by its enduring mystical culture and the health of its Catholic ritual traditions, but it is surely no accident that he was led soon after to a life of comparative artistic and moral freedom in Polynesia where his itinerant life would end in 1903.

What might we make of Gauguin's choice of biblical subject matter in this painting? Jacob, you will remember, encounters the man at the Jabok crossing as he flees in the dead of night not only from his uncle Laban but also from his brother Esau who is hunting him with an army of 400 men. Jacob is aged in his 90s and has the care of his wives, children and animals. After crossing the river he is left for a moment in what seems at first to be a place of stillness and peace but rapidly turns into a place of acute anguish.

Everything about the encounter with the mystery man speaks of restlessness. The meeting takes place in an in-between, liminal space, where neither Jacob nor the man can feel at home: the physical cleft in the land carved by the river represents the uneasy rubbing-up against each other of the heavenly and earthly spheres. Jacob cannot abide in the place because of his impulse to flee, the man cannot remain beyond the dawn.

Identity becomes slippery: though Gauguin called Jacob's opponent 'the angel', the Genesis text refers only to 'the man'. Is this God? Or Christ? Or an angel? If the man wrestling with Jacob seems to channel supernatural power in his struggle could the same not be said of Jacob, the 90-something year old who wrestles through the night? Even the account of the fight becomes confused: the he and hims of the text melt into a confusion which leaves the reader unconvinced of clear divisions between the two figures, their identities intertwined and blurred like a frenzy of grappling limbs. Even names – understood in the ancient world as descriptors of the essence of an individual – become inadequate, corrupted and provisional: Jacob's opponent refuses to divulge his, and instead renames Jacob as Israel, no longer the grabber of Esau's heel but the person who struggles with God.

Even the basic norm that to the victor goes power and control is undermined by the conclusion of the fight. Jacob's hip is put out of joint by the man but even that does not resolve the match: the man has to seek Jacob's mercy because the dawn is approaching. Yet Jacob's victory is eccentric, complicated, even chaotic: he stands in control of the man yet is lame, he exerts power by demanding his assailant's name but is himself renamed, he has the man under his control but thirsts for a blessing from the defeated party and can only conclude the encounter when he receives it.

These aspects of uneasiness no doubt spoke to Gauguin's soul in the difficult year of 1888. They are alive in the *Vision after the Sermon*: the tableau is broken by the diagonally slanting apple tree, itself (as the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden) symbolising the rupture between God and creation. The women are lost in prayer, physically present but spiritually on safari, their faces either hidden entirely or fudged and blurred, with the sole exception of the woman in the centre who leans eagerly away from the earthly to the heavenly, at odds with her companions. The calf under the tree rears up as the expression of some urgent disquiet and the ground is an anchorless, otherworldly vermillion. The wrestling figures are suggested more than depicted, it being unclear who is prevailing, who is supporting whom at that precise moment, whether the man is trying to force Jacob back to the earthly sphere or whether Jacob seeks to force the divine man into the world.

For all that the picture (like the story) is uneasy, there is a redemptive quality about it. Though much of its composition sits uncomfortably around the contrasting poles of heaven and earth, the sense is not that these opposites live in an unbearable tension but rather one which, for all its difficulties, is fruitful. The *Vision's* message seems to be that it is by renouncing an easy account of experience that we approach not only a glimpse of the transcendent but also a more profound encounter with the material and everyday. Just as Jacob relied on a mystical,

dreamlike experience of an anonymous half man, half deity, better to understand not only his present but also his destiny as the father of a nation, so Gauguin provokes us to ask what we are missing by a misguided focus on the material, the measurable and the explainable. Restlessness is transfigured into being, itself, a novel kind of foundation.

It's not hard to think of visionaries from the past whose psychological eccentricity was a portal into an extraordinary perspective which reshaped our sense of the world: Nietzsche and Wittgenstein are obvious examples. No doubt Jacob was another. The challenge which Gauguin presents in this painting is to try to follow them into fruitful encounters of our own.