

## ***Wrestling With God* by Aaron Harper**

This is the contemporary word delivered at St James Uniting Church, Curtin, ACT Australia.

### **Based on the Readings**

*Like Catching Water In A Net – Vall Webb (page 66).*

**Genesis 32:22-31**

*These readings can be found at the end of this exploration.*

### **Wrestling With God**

When I first spoke to you, I said that when approaching scripture, I wasn't overly concerned about the historicity of a particular passage. Issues of history versus myth are important questions, and I don't want to belittle those issues, but they are not my primary focus.

Rather, I approach scripture asking "amongst the thousands of stories that could have been included, why did the author and subsequent editors choose to keep a particular story as part of their sacred literature? What message was the author trying to convey? What response does the author want me to have? How is the story trying to raise my God-consciousness, or challenge my worldview?"

Today we have the story of Jacob, wrestling a man, who we later find out is God. He struggles throughout the night without prevailing, and without getting his one question answered. Afterwards he is rewarded with a blessing and a sore hip.

So why was this story included? What is its message?

Many scholars throughout the ages have had numerous interpretations of what this classic tale means. But for me, I find this story a timeless symbol of humanity's struggle, or wrestle, with this thing, or one, we call God.

It seems to me that there is something within the very fabric of human nature that seeks out that which is beyond, that which is unknown. From the very earliest recordings of human civilisation in carvings and paintings, we know peoples and tribes have wrestled with and worshipped that which they call God.

Perhaps the most amazing and unique aspect of the Bible is that it gives us a record of how the nation of Israel, and then the early Christians, have struggled, or wrestled, with this one called God.

So I thought together we might take a whirlwind overview of that wrestle. For those that are interested, my primary sources are Karen Armstrong's books 'The History of God' and 'The Bible: A Biography', Val Webb's Books 'Like Catching Water In A Net: Human Attempts to Describe the Divine' and 'Stepping Out With The Sacred' and Jack Spong's 'A New Christianity For A New Day'.

We have strong evidence that there were originally two authors of Genesis and Exodus, known as the Elohim writer from North Israel, and the Yahweh writer from South Israel. The Elohim writer focussed on the Abraham's God, El, originally a Canaanite God, who was a mild, even friendly, sage-like deity, intimately involved in man's affairs, often taking on human form and interacting with mankind, such as in our story today. Such an God would later become anathema in Jewish theology.

The Yahweh writer focussed on the God of Moses, Yahweh, who was a distant God, a God who appeared as a burning bush, or a cloud, or a pillar of fire. It is said that no man could see Yahweh and live.

These two stories were later enmeshed under a unified Israel, but it is why we have inconsistencies, such as two creation stories. Nevertheless, the evidence suggest that the God of Abraham, El, was not the God of Moses. In a time where the existence of many gods was readily accepted, it is likely that the God of Abraham, the God of Issac, and the God of Jacob, were probably considered three different deities

This changed with the story of the Exodus. In this story, it was Moses' God Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of War, that delivered the Children of Israel from slavery. Because of this, Israel covenanted themselves to Yahweh. This did not indicate a belief in one God – it was merely the recognition that Yahweh was now Israel's God. With this context, it is easy to understand why one of the ten commandments states 'you shall have no other Gods before me', and that God referred to himself as 'jealous'.

Whilst Yahweh was good as a God of war, he was often not so good at fertility. Thus, it made commonsense for Israel, when needing rain and a harvest, to turn to Baal, the Canaanite fertility God, when things weren't going so well.

In the reign of Josiah, during Temple renovations, the priest Hilkiyah found within the walls an ancient manuscript that purported to be an account of Moses' last sermon. Scholars believe this is the source of the Book of Deuteronomy. Although we don't know who the author was, the script highlighted Moses' covenant with Yahweh, and it

made clear that Israel was to worship Yahweh alone. Yahweh had chosen Israel out of his great love, and demanded complete loyalty and devotion.

Meanwhile world circumstances were changing. First, the Assyrian Empire rose, and then was overtaken by the Babylonian Empire. Prior to this period came the rise of the Jewish prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos. The prophet's wrestle with God was to commence.

The God of the prophets was not the triumphalist God of the Exodus. The prophet's God was a God of sorrow. A God that turned his head from Israel's blood sacrifices, festivals and pilgrimages. What the Prophets revealed was a God of social justice. As the First Isaiah wrote, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good, Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.

The Prophet's were also amongst the first to imagine God in their own image. Their pain was Yahweh's pain, their tears were Yahweh's tears, when Israel rejected them, they also rejected Yahweh. The tradition of attributing human emotion to God had begun.

But, as is still the case throughout much of the Church, Israel found it easier to maintain its empty rituals than to practice the new religion of compassion proffered by the Prophets.

The Prophets, seeing the oncoming catastrophe for Israel from the Assyrians and Babylonians, issued a message of doom to Israel for its unfaithfulness. In doing this, the prophet's reinterpreted Yahweh's role amongst the Gods. Now, when another nation subdued Israel, it was not another nation's God overpowering Yahweh, but it was Yahweh using that other nation for his own purpose. Yahweh controlled all nations.

Israel began to see Yahweh as Chief of the Gods, one whose glory filled the whole Earth. This is poetically captured by the Psalmist in Chapter 82:

God presides in the great assembly;  
he renders judgment among the "gods":

"How long will you defend the unjust  
and show partiality to the wicked?

Defend the weak and the fatherless;  
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

“The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing.  
They walk about in darkness;  
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

“I said, ‘You are “gods”;  
you are all sons of the Most High.’

But you will die like mere mortals;  
you will fall like every other ruler.”

In 587 BC, the remainder of Israel was overpowered by Babylon and taken into captivity. Some, who saw Yahweh as a territorial God, could not perceive him in a foreign land. For others, this experience pushed them into a new religious experience.

Their temple was gone, their liturgies in ruins. All they had was Yahweh, and Yahweh became a vital symbol of national identity.

During this time, we have an unknown person which we now call the second Isaiah. This man proclaimed that not only was Yahweh Israel’s God, but Yahweh was the only God. Thus, we had the birth on Jewish monotheism.

As Second Isaiah wrote in the 45<sup>th</sup> chapter:

Is it not I, the LORD?

And there is no other God besides Me,

A righteous God and a Savior;

There is none except Me.

“Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth;

For I am God, and there is no other.

“I have sworn by Myself,

The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness

And will not turn back,

That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance.

The Second Isaiah’s God was also beyond knowing or understanding. He did not perform miracles or directly interact with man. As Second Isaiah wrote, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways, For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts”.

When the people of Israel were finally allowed to leave Babylon and return to their homeland, it is estimated that only about 40,000 went. Many others stayed or started lives in more stable locations in the known world, in what became known as the Diaspora.

From this time to the time of Israel's destruction, there was a tension between those who worshipped within their own communities in the synagogue, and those who were wanting to impose a recentralised system of animal sacrifice in Jerusalem.

And then there came a man named Jesus. A man whose beliefs and teachings reflected those of the Pharisees, but who seemed to carry God with him. He called God 'Father'. He spoke of an inclusive Kingdom of God that existed beyond the Temple. He loved wastefully beyond cultural and racial barriers. He lived his life fully and helped others live fully. He was fully content in who he was. He brought a new understanding of what God was. He brought the distant Yahweh near. He demonstrated the Prophet's God of social justice. No wonder they called him the Son of God.

Eventually, the authorities tired of his irksome ways. They executed him. He died for what he believed and lived. But death could not hold his message down, and it was said that he arose from the grave.

After Jesus' death, Paul reinterpreted the meaning of Jesus' life, and started a new religion of equality open to Gentiles, women, and slaves. Along with this was the rise of Gnostic Christianity, hidden until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where knowledge was seen as the path to salvation.

In 381AD, after decades, if not centuries, of fierce debate, we have the formation of the doctrine of the Trinity, which became a central tenet of the Church, but of which the meaning has ever had little agreement. When not taken literally, I believe it offers a wonderful premise to meditate on – God beyond, God in man, God in creation – but I'll leave you to ponder that at a later stage.

Under Constantine, the Church begins its long domination of the political landscape, and we have the commencement of the Dark Ages. Here, the Church reverted to old views of God, with God reflecting the powers of human Kings, Lords, and Popes. But even during this period, there were glimmers of people wrestling with God, particularly in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the musings of the Christian mystics, whose writings can still challenge us today.

Then, about 1600 AD, the Reformation began, with Martin Luther formulating his doctrine of justification by faith and pronouncing that man could access God directly

without mediating through a Priest. The Protestant Church was birthed and spread rapidly throughout Europe. Once again, our concept of God was changing.

The Renaissance saw our understanding of God interpreted through music and art.

But the greatest threat to our view of God was only just beginning, and that was the rise of science during the Enlightenment. Science subjugated the God of storms to weather patterns, the God of feast and famine to mass farming and transport, the God of life and death to medicine. And then, and probably most fatally of all, in 1859, the God of creation succumbed to the Theory of Evolution.

But the attack on God was internal as well. Bible scholars started to research the Gospels and come to an understanding of two Jesus' in the New Testament: the Jesus of History and the Jesus of faith. It suddenly seemed that even the Bible was unreliable. What was true, what was hearsay, and what was myth?

It is no wonder that Nietzsche said "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him".

But once again, we wrestled with the one we call God. New understandings were required.

Paul Tillich, reflecting ancient Jewish and Christian mystical thought, began to speak of a God who was not a being, but being itself – the Ground of Being. These ideas were expanded upon by the likes of Bishop John Robinson and Don Cupitt. Today, we have Jack Spong who speaks of a God who is the source of love, the source of life and the source of being, and that we experience that God when we live fully, love wastefully and be all that we can be. It is a view of God that has much meaning to me.

And, finally, we end the current story with you and me, here today in St James.

Just like Jacob, humanity, throughout the ages, has wrestled with God. God has been reimagined throughout history, in accordance with the social, international and scientific circumstances of the day. Throughout history, people have always discarded a conception of God that no longer worked for them. It has never been static, but ever changing. But each society has thought that their concept of God was the true and only one. Man has constantly tried to apply labels to God, and turn them into infallible doctrines. This is a trap, I believe, we must not fall into.

In Jacob's story, he asked a question that perhaps every person who has wrestled with God has asked: 'What is your name'?

I find God's response in this story profound, for God does not answer Jacob's question, but responds with another question: 'why do you want to know my name'?

I think this is God's response whenever we try to label God. God is saying, "Why? Why do you want to name me, label me, and wrap me up in doctrines? I am the nameless, or formless, one".

I believe there is no answer to Jacob's question. God has no names. Val Webb states "anything we say about the Sacred is a metaphor, a construction of language and images and not a description of the real thing, as we have never seen God and cannot know in totality what the divine might be. Metaphors are word pictures borrowed from within particular cultures, traditions and world views to describe something otherwise difficult to describe".

Occasionally, just occasionally, I feel that I get an insight into this one called God. It is often fleeting, or, again in Val Webb's term, like catching water in a net. I feel it, and then it's gone.

It can be in silent mediation. Resting in nature. In the beauty of a profound wine. In a celebration with friends. In understanding new cultures. In learning new things. In observing a piece of art. In listening to music.

When I glimpse this God, I am drawn to words like unity, connectedness, complexity, balance, love, but, perhaps most of all, mystery. It is the mystery that God can be in me and I in God. As the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart wrote "God's existence must be my existence and God's Is-ness is my is-ness".

But then I realise that I have not described God, but only my experience of God. For that is, in the end, all we can do, and we should not mistake for anything other than that. Often now, I am drawn to silence, for in the end, any word or description, becomes unworthy and irrelevant.

There are a few points I want to make in closing.

First, this story demonstrates that there is nothing wrong with wrestling with God. The Church or friends may tell you that to do so is to lack faith; I am here to tell you that it takes faith. Just ask Jacob.

Secondly, Jacob walked away with a bad hip. I think that many of us who have struggled with God could associate with this. In any wrestle with God, we rarely come away unbruised. For some, this struggle has meant leaving Church communities, lost friends,

disputes with family members, arguments with leaders or politicians. It has meant painful personal transformation and change.

Lastly, although Jacob came away with a sore hip, he also came away with a blessing. There is something amazing about walking away from a wrestle with God armed with a new insight, a new understanding, a new goal, a changed vision. I also believe that this story demonstrates that blessing comes from the questions we ask, rather than the answers we receive, for Jacob received no answer.

And it is for this blessing that I think humanity's wrestling with God will continue, for a long, long time yet.

I hope today that this story of Jacob has inspired you to continue to your wrestle with God until that blessing is received, and you too are renewed, challenged and transformed.

### **Sources**

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### **Meditation**

This meditation is from Val Webb's book, 'Like Catching Water In A Net' (page 66).

"If God cannot be limited to one creed, and if we want to say something rather than nothing about the Divine, is there something that can be said with which most religions would agree, even though they may spell out the details in different ways?"

I propose Formlessness.

The book of Deuteronomy warned the Hebrew people not to make any images of that which they experienced. The Upanishads speak of Brahm's form as "not in the field of

vision: no one sees him with mortal eyes”, and Buddhahood is described as having no shape or color, and since Buddha has no shape or color, he comes from nowhere and there in nowhere for him to go”.

With no one shape, existence, or description, Formlessness can equally be anything, the Ground of being, the Wind Beneath Our Wings, the Lifeblood in our veins, the Urge of the Universe, Love, Potentiality – the list goes on:

You are the thought before I think  
You are the urge before I sing  
You are the nudge before I act  
You are the spring before I walk  
You are the prayer before I sleep  
You are the dawn before I wake  
You are the breath before I live.”

### **Genesis 32:22-31**

Today’s reading is from ‘The Message (MSG)’ version of the Hebrew Scriptures

<sup>22-23</sup> But during the night he got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He got them safely across the brook along with all his possessions.

<sup>24-25</sup> But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.

<sup>26</sup> The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."  
Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

<sup>27</sup> The man said, "What's your name?"  
He answered, "Jacob."

<sup>28</sup> The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through."

<sup>29</sup> Jacob asked, "And what's your name?"  
The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him.

<sup>30</sup> Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!"

<sup>31-32</sup> The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip.