

**Notes on Genesis 7:
Wrestling in Faith: The Story of Jacob
(Genesis 25 to 36)
Fretheim Explores Genesis,
Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

Key Theme: Wrestling in Faith

- ◆ Jacob and Esau wrestling in the womb
- ◆ Rachel and Leah “wrestle” over who would be more loved by Jacob
- ◆ The wrestling match between Jacob and God
 - Jacob: gets his name changed to “Israel” -- one who wrestles with God
 - Jacob becomes a people. The nation of Israel saw itself mirrored in the person of Jacob: a nation who wrestles with God

God Chooses to Work in and Through Flawed Human Beings

- ◆ The story is remarkably free of pretence. We see Jacob with his strengths as well as his flaws -- no attempt here to spin an idyllic story of the genesis of the nation of Israel
- ◆ A remarkable fact: Jacob is flawed, yet nonetheless God chooses him for God’s purposes. “God is not a moralist.”
 - God does not chose Jacob because Jacob has a better character. Jacob’s treatment of Esau cannot be justified. God’s reason for choosing is beyond us.
 - ❖ We can note that when God chooses, God often overturns customary ways of doing things.
 - God does not express concern about the flaws of the people in this story.
 - God chooses to work in and through flawed people

God’s Choices Can Create Conflict

- ◆ God’s choosing generates part of the conflict that we see in these stories. The conflict that arises is not merely the result of the flaws and foibles of human beings, but also from problems that arise from God’s choosing.
- ◆ As a result, God gets involved in our lives in ways we cannot ignore. God “gets in our face” at times

The Structure of the Story of Jacob: Four Pillars

- ◆ Four Pillars = Four Appearances of God in the story:
 - 1. Chapter 25: God appears to Rebekah and tells her the meaning of the struggle of the twins (Esau and Jacob) in her womb

- 2. Chapter 28: Jacob's Dream at Bethel as he leaves the promised land to flee Esau's anger
- 3. Chapter 32: Jacob wrestles with God
- 4. Chapter 35: God appears to Jacob at Bethel and confirms promises made to Jacob
- ◆ The birth of Jacob's twelve children occurs right in the middle of these "Four Pillars."
 - Chapter 29:31 to 30:23
 - Dinah - the 12th child
 - The 12 children are born to four women:
 - ❖ Jacob's two wives: Leah and Rachel
 - ❖ the two slave girls of Leah and Rachel
 - Leah and Rachel name all the children

The First Pillar: God's Appearance to Rebekah (Chapter 25)

- ◆ Why would God tell Rebekah about the future struggle of Esau and Jacob, that the oldest would serve the younger?
 - God's oracle is a statement of the future's direction, not a statement of certainty. By telling Rebekah, God enlists Rebekah on God's side with respect to God's choice of Jacob
 - Rebekah does not act passively, presuming that God's will shall be done. Rather, Rebekah tries to shape her children's lives for the future that God desires
- ◆ Note that God chooses the woman, not the man Isaac, as the one in and through which God will work, apparently because God knows Rebekah is more likely to work with energy to bring about the future God desires.

The Second Pillar: Jacob's Dream at Bethel (Chapter 28)

- ◆ Hymn "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder:" a misinterpretation: angels are going up and down the ladder, not Jacob.
 - The ladder was actually probably a ramp or staircase to a ziggurat (temple tower).
 - Typically priests go up and down the ramp, acting as God's intermediaries. But here God comes down the ladder and stands with Jacob in his dream.
- ◆ God's words to Jacob are filled with promises: Chapter 28:13-15. There are two kinds of promises made to Jacob:
 - land and many descendants, blessing to others (picking up on the promises to Abraham and Isaac)
 - personal promises to Jacob (I am with you, will keep you, will not leave you)

The Third Pillar: Jacob Wrestles with God (Chapter 32:22-32)

- ◆ Setting: Jacob is coming back into the promised land to meet Esau. The night before, God meets Jacob at the border into the promised land

- God probably initiates the wrestling match
- At first it is unclear to the reader who the man is who is wrestling with Jacob. It becomes apparent only through the course of the night that the man wrestling with Jacob is God who has assumed human form
- ◆ Was this an actual wrestling match? Or just a spiritual struggle?
 - This is not a dream: it seems to be a real physical struggle. Jacob's hip gets dislocated, and he will limp away
 - "God encounters people in ways that best connect with who they are." Jacob is a wrestler; so that is how God meets Jacob
 - Just as Jacob wrestled with all his strength, we are not called to be passive or self-effacing in our struggles with God. Israel knew to bring all its capacities and talents to its wrestlings with God. This is what it means to be *in relationship* with God.
- ◆ Wasn't God just playing with Jacob? Couldn't God have won the match in an instant if God wanted to? Did God just let Jacob "prevail"?
 - We are not seeing God in all God's glory here. God has stooped to encounter Jacob at his own level.
 - God even commends Jacob for "holding his own" with God
 - It seems that "God commits to a genuine encounter with Jacob." He engages Jacob "with the kind of power that does not overpower." "God chooses to have a power that is in some sense comparable to the power Jacob that brings to this moment." Thus "The will of God can be resisted."
 - Implication: our encounters with God are *genuine engagements*. God truly "mixes it up" with us. God may even have a new appreciation for us after our engagement.
- ◆ Note also that God's encounter with Jacob is at a vulnerable moment in Jacob's life: the night before he will face Esau again
 - "God puts Jacob through a struggle the night before in order to better prepare him for the encounter [with Esau] the next day."

References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000. (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.