

Christmas Present

Man / God, God—Man

- ¹ Now Jacob went on his way, and **the angels of God** met him.
- ² And when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.
- ³ And Jacob sent messengers before him to **Esau** his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom,
- ⁴ instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now.
- ⁵ I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"
- ⁶ And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him."
- ⁷ Then **Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed**. He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into **two camps**,
- ⁸ thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape."
- ⁹ And Jacob said, "**O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac**, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,'
- ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.
- ¹¹ Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children.
- ¹² But you said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'"
- ¹³ So he stayed there that night, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau,
- ¹⁴ two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams,
- ¹⁵ thirty milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.
- ¹⁶ These he handed over to his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me and put a space between drove and drove."
- ¹⁷ He instructed the first, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?'
- ¹⁸ then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a present sent to my lord Esau. And moreover, he is behind us.'"
- ¹⁹ He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you find him,
- ²⁰ and you shall say, 'Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.'" For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me."
- ²¹ So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp.
- ²² The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven

- children, and crossed **the ford of the Jabbok**.
- 23 He took them and sent them across the **stream**, and everything else that he had.
- 24 And Jacob was left alone. And **a man wrestled** with him until the breaking of the day.
- 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.
- 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."
- 27 And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."
- 28 Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."
- 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.
- 30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."
- 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.
- 32 Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

Genesis 32:1-32

Late In Flesh Appearing

In the **Apostle's Creed** we say, "I believe ... in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was **conceived** by the Holy Ghost, **born** of the Virgin Mary." **The Nicene Creed** fleshes this out a bit more adding that Christ "came down from heaven, [and] was **incarnate** of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary." I say it "fleshes" this out and I meant this literally, because it uses the word "incarnate."

"Incarnation" is a wonderful and ancient Latin word derived from *in* and *caro* (*incarno*), meaning "to be made flesh." But the Nicene Creed was originally written in Greek. The Greek equivalent of *incarno* is *sarkōthentos*. This is the actual word used in the Creed. It comes from the root word *sarx*, a word found throughout the NT. **Sarx** means "flesh." Thus, "Incarnation' means literally 'en-fleshment' or, slightly more fully, 'embodiment in flesh.'"¹ You can see now how the Nicene Creed fleshes out the Apostle's Creed.

The Incarnation is **the foundational doctrine of the whole Christian religion**. It is foundational, because without it, nothing else that Jesus did would have been possible. His death may be more personal. His resurrection may be more eternally vital. But if Christ did not incarnate, he could not have died or been raised to from the dead.

Christmas is—for better or worse—the time when most Christians sing about the incarnation. Four lines from four different songs set here in a kind of rhyme of

¹ James D. G. Dunn, "Incarnation," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 397.

their own help us remember: “What Child Is This?” “Born To Set Thy People Free.” “Late In Flesh Appearing.” Hail The Incarnate Deity.” Surely, it is good to remember and celebrate the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, whenever someone chooses to do so.

But our text today poses a potentially very serious problem for all of this. Before us is a passage which, as **Martin Luther** says, “is regarded by all as among the most obscure passages of the whole Old Testament.”² It is obscure the way it starts out—**Jacob meets a company of angels**. It is obscure the way it ends—**Jacob wrestles with a very mysterious figure**. The middle gives us the context. Jacob is preparing to meet his brother Esau, after having just left his uncle Laban in peace.

What I want to focus most on today is the strange tale of Jacob wrestling with someone throughout the night. It appears at the end of the story: **Gen 32:24-32**. Then, I want to help us think about this encounter in relation to the encounter of those that lived in the time of Jesus Christ, nearly 2,000 years later. This will actually be a kind of Christmas sermon, but it may be from one of the most unusual and unsuspected places imaginable. To get there, we have to see this episode in its proper context.

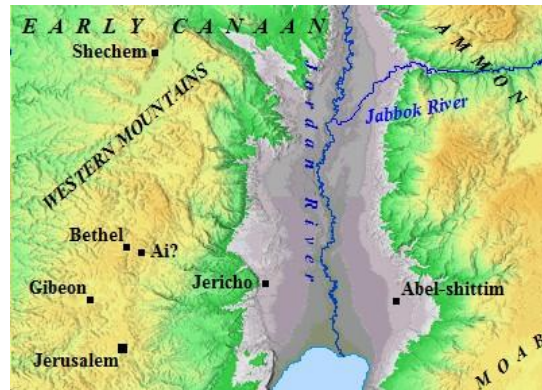
A Company of Angels and The Tent of El

The story begins loudly and clearly, like a “Shot Through the Heart” (Bon Jovi). It starts memorably and forcefully like Beethoven’s “Fifth Symphony.” It launches us into the otherworldly like Holst’ “Jupiter: The Bringer of Jolly,” or Europe’s “Final Countdown.” “**Now Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him**” (**Gen 32:1**). It speaks so casually about something so very extraordinary. Ho-Hum. The angels went out and met Jacob. Why did this happen? Why did they do this? And why do we need to know about it?

First, why did it happen? Jacob had meandered into a place that, perhaps, he should not have. Nevertheless, he was going this direction, perhaps, in order to avoid Esau. He has been travelling south and west from Haran to Canaan. He is now apparently ready to enter Edom, which is where, unbeknownst to Jacob, Esau had become very powerful.

In those days, the boundary between Gilead and Edom appears to have been the Jabbok River (today’s Zarqa River, Jordan). The river is really more like one of our Front Range creeks. It is a minor tributary to the Jordan, a little south of the half way line between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea on the east side.

² Martin Luther, “Gen 32:24,” in *Luther’s Works, Vol. 6: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 6 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 125.



At the very least, Jacob did not realize where he was in terms of [cosmic geography](#) or the geographical boundaries as divided up amongst the sons of God. You will remember that, whether or not it was the case prior to Abraham, Canaan would become Yahweh’s territory. By Yahweh, I mean the Son of God. Jacob is about to leave his province. What do I mean?

Perhaps the 5,000 year old Baal Cycle, which the OT prophets knew and preached that Christ, not Baal, was the true Son of El would be helpful in seeing this better. “Then he³ set his face indeed towards El at the [source of the rivers](#), amidst the springs of the two deeps. He rolled back [the tent of El](#) and entered [the pavilion of the King](#), the Father of the Bright One” (KTU 1.2.iii.3-5). This describes the dwelling of El, the Most High God. It describes him [living by the rivers](#) and in a [tent](#). Ezekiel gives the same idea this way, “Son of man (*adam*), say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because your heart is proud, and you have said, ‘I am a god (*El*), I sit in the seat of the gods (*elohim*), in the heart of the seas,’ yet you are but a man (*adam*), and no god (*El*), though you make your heart like the heart of a god (*elohim*)’” (Ezek 28:2). Here, the prophet uses the same name for God: El. He says that El again lives by the waters. This is the idea going on in [Genesis 32:1-2](#).

Look again at [Gen 32:2](#), “Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s [camp!](#)’” The word “camp” implies a kind of temporary dwelling of living in tents, just like the Baal Cycle describes. In vv [22-23](#), we learn that this camp is right beside a [river](#)—“[the ford of the Jabbok](#)” (22) and “[the stream](#)” (23). Again, similar to the Canaanite worldview. There are angels of God here at this place,⁴ and they come out to meet with Jacob, apparently to give him some word of where he is. As they are angels of

³ The “he” here is Baal’s brother Yam (Sea). This story is about how Baal takes the throne from Yam, one of the sons of El.

⁴ This is also true in the Baal Cycle. It says, “Lo, the gods saw them, they saw the messengers/angels of Yam, the embassy of Ruler [Nahar]” (KTU 1.2.i.23). Here, the lesser god Yam has his own angels that do his bidding.

God, they are messengers of God (“angel” means “messenger”). Therefore, they must also be delivering some kind of a message for God himself. The event is so powerfully imprinted on Jacob’s mind that he names the place Mahanaim. Mahanaim means “two camps.” It is presumably named after Jacob’s camp and God’s camp.⁵

Jacob And Esau to Meet Again...

This is a very important introduction to events that will take place later on in the chapter. Do not forget it. But for now, the story unfolds for us, in my opinion, something of what Jacob was told by the angels. “Jacob sent messengers⁶ before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.” Presumably, the angels were the ones telling Jacob to do this, for he had come to the border of what was then the northern edge of Edom. Otherwise, their presence here as messengers makes little sense. So what might they have told Jacob to do?

Perhaps it is what Jacob himself sent his own messengers to say to Esau. “Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, ‘I have sojourned with Laban and stayed until now [20 years]. I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male servants, and female servants. I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight’” (Gen 32:4-5). The messengers return and report, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him” (6).

It appears that Jacob is badly misunderstood. His purpose in going to Esau was not to threaten him with a show of force. But it appears that this is exactly how Esau has taken it. It says, “Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed” (7). Do not underestimate the force of these words. Jacob had stolen the most important thing in the world from Esau by tricking and deceiving him many years ago. Now, his twin brother has become a mighty nation himself, with 400 infantry ready to carry out the last thing he knew about Esau—he wanted to kill him. If Esau took Jacob’s words as saying, “I’m very powerful now, so watch yourself,” Esau was not intimidated in the slightest.

But Jacob’s point, I believe, was to tell his brother that he has not come here as a warrior. You don’t tell someone you are about to make war on that you have lots of sheep and women in your company. Nevertheless, Jacob is afraid that it will all be destroyed by his brother hell-bent on revenge. If you put yourself in his shoes, you can almost taste the fear in the air.

⁵ It is possible that he names it after the two camps that Jacob later puts his family into, but this does not seem to make sense of it being named at this moment, in the context of “God’s camp.”

⁶ This is the same word *malak* (angel) used in vs. 1. There is a play here: God sends angel/messengers to Jacob. Jacob sends messengers to Esau.

Preparation

So Jacob divided his people into two camps (7), thinking, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left with escape” (8). When you look at the terrain of the place this meeting occurred, you would probably laugh at his plan. It is a hilly, desert wasteland. There is nowhere to escape with animals, women, and children from an army of four hundred men. But preparing in this way is the only thing he can think of doing.



Prayer

Well, it is not the *only* thing. Jacob has another thought. **He must pray.** We have not seen Jacob pray very often. He did swear to God that if he would be with him and return him to the land, that this God would be his God. Now he knows that God has kept his word, and so he prays, but still not in a completely personal way. “And Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan,⁷ and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude’” (Gen 32:9-12).

These remarkable words have all of the elements of a good prayer, and it is worth thinking about here. **First**, he directs his prayer to a very specific God. We live in a nation where prayer to “G-O-D” is still acceptable in many place, but do not dare pray in Jesus’ name. But Jacob directs his prayer to the Lord Jesus. For Christ is the God that has shown himself to Jacob time and time again. It matters

⁷ A foreshadowing of Moses leaving Egypt?

which God you pray to. Prayers to Allah or Krishna or the deistic god of America are prayers to different gods than the one Jacob prays to here. This is one of the reasons why it is so vital to grasp that there are, as the Apostle says, “**many gods and many lords**” (1 Cor 8:5). You do not want to pray to the wrong God. That is asking for big trouble. You must pray to and worship the Uncreated Creator of all, not lesser created beings.

Second, Jacob **extols the goodness of this God**. Only Christ is the Good God, the Good Shepherd. Only Christ shows **steadfast love** and **faithfulness** that cannot be undone even by our own rebellion and sin. All other gods are fickle. But the Lord Jesus is not like them. He alone is Good, loving, and faithful. This is because, third, as Jacob also realizes, God **promises to be to his covenant people**. Jacob is calling upon the LORD to remember that He is the one that came to Jacob. It was not the other way around. He is the one that swore a promise to Jacob. Now Jacob is calling upon God to remember his oath, an oath that he knows full well God has kept, even making him into a mighty camp of people.

Therefore, Jacob prays for **deliverance**. In doing so, he acknowledges his own fear of his brother. We know that fearing others is a sin. We are told not to fear anything but the LORD. So Jacob acknowledges his sin here, even as he prays for protection from the Divine Being that is capable and good enough to answer. Directing our prayers to the right God, recalling in prayer God’s attributes, remembering his covenant promises and faithfulness, confessing our sin, and basing our requests upon those things is how we should all pray, for not only does it acknowledge what is right, it frames in our own minds what we ought to be asking God for. Can you imagine praying all of those things and then asking God to make you rich or to give you the Christmas present you always wanted, or many other possible requests that serve nothing more than to make you happy? No, root your prayers in these things, and your requests will naturally be made as responses to the God you are praying to.

Appeasement

Perhaps in answer to his prayer, Jacob’s mind is filled with **a new thought**. He stayed in that place that night, and took from what he had **a present** for his brother Esau (13). It reads like the 12 Days of Christmas on Steroids: 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 milking camels, all of their calves, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, and 10 male donkeys (14-15). This is **an incredible gift**, and it shows us very specifically just how much God had blessed Jacob.

He divided them up among three servants, who were each told to approach Esau **in lines** or droves, one at a time, in succession, each telling Esau that this is a

present from Jacob who is behind them at camp (16-20). That would have made quite an impression, and it tells us that Jacob thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me” (20). Jacob is trying to temper wrath with grace. If “A soft answer turns away wrath” (Prov 15:1), how much more a gift such as this? Jacob is doing everything he can think of to save those around him, and his actions are clearly those of a man growing in wisdom and faith.

But he has **one more thought**. He cannot sleep. He is still deeply troubled that even preparation, prayer, and appeasement may not work. He loses a bit of faith because of his continued fear. “The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children,⁸ and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had” (22-23). “Jabbok” means “Emptying; pouring out; running out,” and this is what is happening to Jacob. If everything else fails, perhaps this small company of his most prized possessions, his immediate family, may be able to flee to safety.

Wrestling with God

This left Jacob alone (24).

And a man wrested with him until the breaking of the day (24).

We now come to the truly enigmatic part of our story. Until now, everything save the first couple of verses has been pretty straight forward and easy to understand. A man is about to meet his brother whom he so badly hurt years before. His brother appears to not have forgiven him. Jacob has done all sorts of things to insure the safety of those under his authority. Some has been out of **fear**. Some has been out of **faith**. And now the man with so much given to him by God is alone. And a man wrested with him until the breaking of the day.

Let’s take this one verse at a time, not getting ahead of ourselves, though most of us already know much of the story and have formulated our views long ago. There is much strangeness about **vs. 24**. How can Jacob be alone and yet wrestle with a man? Where did this man come from? He appears out of thin air. Who is this man? Why is he wrestling with Jacob? Should we take this literally or figurative? Many of these questions are answered as the story unfolds.

First, should we take the wrestling **literally or figuratively**, as if Jacob is somehow just “wrestling in prayer” or something? **Vs. 25** tells us that, “The man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, so he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.” Then in **vv. 31** we read, “The sun

⁸ The reference is obviously only to the boys, as Dinah would have made at least 12 children. He clearly took her too.

rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.” This is obviously not meant to be taken as some kind of figurative limp. To put the final nail in the figurative coffin, the last verse says, “Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh” (32). No, this is a literal man literally wrestling with Jacob.

The next question we can answer is, **who is this man?** Here we see the first Wrestlemania. The main attraction has Jacob the Deceiver pitted against Masked Man. At first, the masked man seems quite ordinary, perhaps even weak. The man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob (25). The man was losing. This is like the 5’7”, 175 lb. Rey Misterio going up against 7’4”, 520 lb. behemoth Andre the Giant. Jacob was winning. It is a long match, ending only when the sun comes up. The man demands that Jacob let him go (26). Jacob has him in a figure four leg lock.

But then, in the same breath, it says the mystery man simply touched Jacob’s hip socket, and put the hip out of joint with nothing but his finger. Your first impulse might be to think “**that’s cheating**” (I told you it was the first Wrestlemania). But that’s not the question I ask. Rather, how can a man that is losing a wrestling match so easily put a hip out of socket? This is the truly strange part of **vs. 25**. It apparently had an impact on Jacob.

Once the man tells Jacob to let him go, Jacob answered, “**I will not let you go unless you bless me**” (26). What would make him say such a thing? Suddenly, we remember **the first couple of verses of the chapter**. Now they become very important. Jacob has pitched his tent right in the middle of “**God’s (elohim) camp**.” Earlier in the night, he had spoken with more than one angel of God. Now, he understands that **he must be wrestling with one of them**, for it cannot be one of his own company, nor would it seem plausible that one of Esau’s men got behind the lines simply to come and wrestle with Jacob. It has to be an angel.

Of course, this opens up all kinds of questions. Aren’t angels just apparitions that float around either in dreams or in visions, more like sugarplums than physical beings? Aren’t they like Ghosts or holograms—ephemeral, translucent, and non-corporeal? The Roman philosopher **Cicero** summarizes the problem well:

Many views are put forward about the outward form of the gods [the LXX calls them “angels”], their dwelling places and abodes, and mode of life, and these topics are debated with the widest variety of opinion among philosophers ... There is in fact no subject upon which so much difference of opinion exists, not only among the unlearned but also among educated men; and the views entertained are so various and so discrepant, that, while it is no doubt a possible

alternative that none of them is true, it is certainly impossible that more than one should be so.⁹

If the pagans had many views, the Bible has one uniform view, even if we don't like it or know what to do with it. It is true that often in the Bible, these beings **come in dreams and visions**. But not always. They are often seen by more than one individual (in both Testaments). And as we have seen in Genesis 18, they can—if they so desire—come quite physically, for Abraham washed their feet and they consumed a meal with Abraham and his family. For some reason, this fact has escaped many Christians and bothered not a few others. For example, incorrectly supposing that that demons are fallen angels (a belief not held during the writing of the Scriptures), *The Bible Answer Man* writes:

The notion that demons can “produce” real bodies ... would invalidate Jesus' argument for the authenticity of his resurrection. Jesus assured his disciples that “a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:39 nkjv). If indeed a demon could produce flesh and bones, Jesus' argument would be not only flawed but also misleading. In fact, it might be logically argued that the disciples did not see the post-resurrection appearances of Christ but rather a demon masquerading as the resurrected Christ.¹⁰

Whatever you might think of the argument, one thing is clear. Angels do in fact take very physical form and “assume” physical bodies. Demons are always spirits. They have no physicality. Not so with angels. There is just no way around this fact.

The suggestion at this point is that an angel is wrestling with Jacob. this seems to be his own opinion too, as he wants this being to bless him. It is also the opinion of others. In fact, almost are willing to call this person an angel, **but which angel?** Some Jews believed it was **Esau's guardian angel**, there to defend Esau from Jacob.¹¹ Others said it was the angel **Sariel** (Targum Neofiti). Still others said it was **Michael**.¹² Confirming that *some* angel *is* in mind is made absolutely certain by the prophet Hosea. “**In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor...**” (Hos 12:3-4).

⁹ Cicero, *De nat. dear.* 1. 1. 2—3; 1. 2. 5. Trans. H. Rackham, *Cicero*, 3, 5. Cited in Paul Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impossible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 22.

¹⁰ Hank Hanegraaff, “Did demons have sexual relations with women in Genesis 6:4?,” in *The Complete Bible Answer Book* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

¹¹ See Luther, “Gen 32:24,” in *Works*. Vol. 6, p. 129.

¹² Lewis Ginzberg, “Jacob Wrestles with the Angel, in *Legends of the Jews*,” I.6.

The ESV translates it as “the angel.” Others have “an angel.” So which angel is it? As we try to discover the answer, let us return to the dialogue. It moves from Jacob back to the man. “**‘What is your name?’ and he said, ‘Jacob’**” (Gen 32:27). The point is *not* to exchange introductions, as we will see immediately. This is not two strangers becoming acquainted. For it says, “**Then he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven/struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed’**” (28). It isn’t that this man did not know Jacob, but he asked Jacob to tell him his name so that he might *change* Jacob’s name. This could only mean that this man is **Jacob’s God**, for this is what God had already done for Abram and Sarai. It is God who changes a man’s name in the Bible. All of this also shows that Jacob asked God to bless him because he knew exactly with whom he was wrestling.

In the man’s response we learn more. First, we learn **the reason** for the wrestling match. It was a “struggle.” Jacob had to struggle in order to prevail. This is the way of difficulty and suffering, not the way of glory and exaltation. The meek inherit the earth. Those who are humbled are lifted up.

There are a couple of words here. “**Wrestle**” (32:24) is the word *abaq*. It is a play on the name of the stream (*Yabbok*) and probably *Yaaqob* (Jacob) and “prevailed” (*yakol*) as well. So a man *abaq’ed* with *Yaaqob* near the *Yabbok* and he *yakol’ed*. This is closely related to another word. This word is “**striven**” (28). It is the same word (*srh*) as what would later become Abraham’s wife’s new name (*Sarah*).

Now notice that Jacob’s name is changed to “Israel.” This is the first mention of this word in the Bible. The word “Israel” has “striven” (*srh*) in its root. The word “Israel” **literally means “striving with El (God).”** Earlier, I gave you the name of the high God of Canaan. His name is El. In the text, he was the God who dwells in the tent by the source of the rivers. “El” is one of the names by which the Patriarchs also knew God. The simply means “God.” Listen to how they commemorate him: Ishmael, Israel, Bethel, etc. If you look at **vs. 30**, you will see that Jacob calls the place “Peniel.”¹³ We have also seen God called El Elyon (Most High God; 14:18-22), El-Roi (God Who Sees; 16:13), El Olam (Eternal God; 21:33), and so on.¹⁴

And yet, the idea of Jacob wrestling with El would be akin to him wrestling with God the Father in Christian theology. El was the high God with seventy sons in Canaanite theology. He was the father god. But this is not what was happening in our story. Instead, there is something else going on here.

¹³ See Ezek 28:2 (above) and how there it is also El whose seat is in the midst of the waters.

¹⁴ For a discussion, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 295 and xxxiii.

TZ Theologische Zeitschrift

After the man asks Jacob to tell him his name, and then changes that name to Israel, Jacob returns the favor. “Please tell me your name” (Gen 32:29). Consider how similar Jacob’s request is to something Moses asks the Angel of the LORD (Ex 3:2) who is in the burning bush, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Ex 3:13). The coincidences are not accidental. Jacob is prefiguring Moses here, from his crossing the river, to his meeting with God, to his asking God’s name. And of course, we will later learn that Jacob will take his family down into Egypt which will pave the way for the need of an exodus centuries later.

But there is another story that we have to turn to as well. It is the story of Samson’s mother and father also meeting the Angel of the LORD (Jdg 13:3, 13ff). It tells us that Manoah (Samson’s father) did not know he was talking to the Angel of the LORD (13:16). So he asks, “What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honor you” (17).

The answer Jacob gets to the question is, “Why is it that you ask my name” (*la’mma zze tis’al lismi*; Gen 32:29). The answer Manoah gets is identical, but adds two Hebrew words, “Why is it that you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?” (*la’mma zze tis’al lismi wuhu peli’γ*; Jdg 13:18). Notice how both of these are in the form of a question. It isn’t for you to know my name Jacob and Manoah.

To commemorate Pharaoh being drown in the Sea, Moses sang a song. One of the lines of that song says, “Who, is like you, O LORD, among the gods?” Again, we have a question. The way the answer concludes is also a question. “Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders” (Ex 15:11)? “Who is like you ... among the gods” (*mi-kamo’ka ba’elim*) is a longer form of a name you all know: Michael (*mi-ka-El*). “Michael” is probably a question: Who is Like El? Michael just happens to be the only archangel we know of from Scripture (Jude 1:9). He also happens to be Israel’s angel/prince (Dan 10:21; 12:1).

One more thing worth noting is Isaiah 9:6. It is that wonderful Christmas verse, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Here, the Messiah is called Wonderful. And, he is called “God.” But the LXX, which the Church Fathers quoted from regularly,¹⁵ translates this as, “Angel of great counsel” or “Angel of the Great

¹⁵ “... the Son is the Angel of great counsel” (Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit* 2.2.20); “... the Lord Jesus Christ. ‘A Son,’ they say, has been given to us, on whose shoulder the government is from above; and His name is called the Angel of great counsel” (Ignatius, *Letter to the Antiochians* 3); “... we are speaking about the Godhead ... For unto us a Son is born ... His name shall be called the angel of great counsel” (John Cassian, *On the Incarnation of the Lord, Against Nestorius*, 2.3); “And Christians have nothing to fear, even if demons should not be well-disposed to them ... He who by his piety possesses the favour of the Most High, who has accepted the

Council.” Either way, it refers to him as an angel. Now we have come full circle back to Hosea, except for now, we are able to see that this angel is also God. And in fact, the line after he says Jacob wrestled with the angel, Hosea says, “**He met God at Bethel, and there God spoke with us--.**”¹⁶ Yes, indeed, the angel Jacob wrestled with was God.

Jacob is content that he may not know God’s name (the Angel would later reveal his covenant name to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14). But he does know this is God. After refusing to tell him his name, the man blessed Jacob (Gen 32:29), just as Jacob had asked. Suddenly, he just disappears as mysteriously as he emerged. Then it says, “**So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered’**” (30). Peniel is literally, “The Face of God” or “God’s Face.”

There is an idiom here: “**Face to face.**” Jacob is saying that he saw God’s face. But does this not pose a problem? Did not God tell Moses, “**No one may see my face and live**” (Ex 33:20)?¹⁷ And does not John tell us that no one has ever seen God (John 1:18; 1Jn 4:12). So how can Jacob say that he has seen God? The answer is that he saw God’s face through the only mediator between God and man. Jacob wrestled with Christ.

The ESV Study Bible on Gen 32:24 says that “**God appears in human form, anticipating the incarnation of Christ.**”¹⁸ This is not entirely correct as I will explain in a moment. **Martin Luther** is much better when he says, “**But our opinion is this, that the wrestler is the Lord of glory, God Himself, or God’s Son, who was to become incarnate and who appeared and spoke to the fathers.**”¹⁹

To conclude this sermon, I want to return to the very strange phrase, “**You have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed**” (Gen 32:28). Our focus

guidance of Jesus, the “Angel of the great counsel,” being well contented with the favour of God through Christ Jesus, may say with confidence that he has nothing to suffer from the whole host of demons” (Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.27); see also Theodoret, *Counter Statements* 6; Athanasius, *Hom. Matt. XI:XXVII* 5; Novatian, *The Trinity* 31; Justin, *Dialogue* 126; Leo, *Letter* 28.2; *Const. Apost.* 8.12; Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor, Paedagogus* 1.5.

¹⁶ The text actually reads, “he” rather than “God.” But the previous verse ends with “in his manhood he strove with God,” where “God” is *elohim* combined with a singular verb, meaning that it refers to God rather than gods.

¹⁷ This difficult passage may have the Son speaking for the Father—i.e. the Son is relaying to Moses that no one may see the Father’s face. However, It is better to see the Son as speaking for himself—as he is unveiled apart from creation. Jacob saw the son “clothed” in some kind of flesh. Moses had seen the son “clothed” in fire or a cloud (images of the Spirit). The Son allowed Moses to somehow see his “backside” unveiled, but he could not see his face.

¹⁸ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 107.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 6: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 6 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 130.

is on “... with God and with men.” Virtually every commentary (that bothers to talk about this) takes this very generally about Jacob’s whole life. His life is has been a great struggle with men: Esau, Laban, perhaps even himself. The word for man here is in the plural, and so this is fine as far as it goes. But there is something that is rarely if ever understood or remembered.

What people do not seem to take notice of is the Hebrew word for “men” here. It is the word “*ish*.” I have used the Scripture’s own language often in this sermon that “a man” (*ish*) wrestled with Jacob. I have done this intentionally, because now we are returning to the potentially devastating part of this text for the whole of our Christian faith.

Remember that the Creeds say that God “incarnated.” The idea is that God *became man*. This is the whole point of celebrating Christ’s birth at Christmas or any other time. But here it says that God was already a man. So what is unique about the incarnation? Is there anything at all? Brothers and sisters, there is everything unique about the resurrection, and it all hangs on the word for “man” here.

One of the “men” Jacob struggled against has to include *this* man, doesn’t it, the man he is wrestling with *right here*. It is not enough to say that Jacob wrestled with different people throughout his life. The context is that he is wrestling with a man right now. This man is what I would call an *ish*-man. But “ish” is a word used for more than human beings. Back in Genesis 19 it told us that two angels came to Sodom ([Gen 19:1](#)). We saw in Gen 18 that these angels had bodies, and we see that here in our story as well.

[1 Cor 15:40-41](#) is very important here. Remember what Cisero said, that everyone has an opinion on the bodies of angels. So also did Paul. It says, “There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.”

In the ancient mind, Paul was using the sun, moon, and stars in a kind of sacramental way to talk about heavenly or angelic bodies. But importantly, he says that their bodies are not like human bodies. The word he uses for a “body” here is *soma*. All created things have *soma*-bodies. But humans and animals have *sarx*-bodies. That is, they have fleshly bodies. Our bodies are made of natural “stuff” not supernatural “stuff.” Our bodies are tied to the present age. Whatever an angel’s body is capable of doing in our physical world, it is still not *sarx*, it is *soma*. This is because angels are *ish*-men, not *adam*-men.

Do you remember Genesis 1 that God made “man” in his image? The word

here is not *ish*, but *adam*. That is why the first man gets named Adam. What we are discovering then is that angels and men all have *soma-bodies* and all are *ish-men*. But of the two, only humans have *sarx-bodies*, because only humans are *adam-men*, made from the dust of the earth.

Angels	Man
<i>Soma-body</i>	<i>Soma-body and Sarx body</i>
<i>Ish-man</i>	<i>Ish-man and Adam-man</i>

Jesus is called the “*son of man*.” This OT phrase is always *adam*. It is never *ish*. Jesus had to become more than *ish*. He had to become *adam*. He is the son of Adam ([Luke 3:38](#)). He is the last Adam ([1 Cor 15:45](#)). When Jesus became a man, he cast off his angelic *soma-body* (a body that was itself created for the uncreated Word of God, so that he might interact with his creation in a way that angels and men could understand) and took on human flesh. This is John’s great offense: The Word became flesh (*sarx*), and made his tent/tabernacle/camp among us ([John 1:14](#)).

This is the great mystery of our faith. But that mystery begins much earlier when even Jacob knew Christ and indeed wrestled with him. The ESV is wrong, I believe, in saying that Christ appeared in human form. He, he didn’t. He appeared in angelic form or the kind that this particular class of heavenly being takes when it interacts with us down here. Throughout the Scripture, angels are often called men, but they are never called *adam-men*. Never.

That is reserved for Christ only once he incarnates, being conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born the Virgin Mary. Angels long to look into *these* things. No doubt, Jacob’s interaction does anticipate the incarnation. But this does not diminish from Jacob’s actually knowing and wrestling with Christ who in this very verse has to be called the *God-ish-man*, for Jacob wrestled with God and man. But now, Christ is the *God-adam-man*, [Theanthropos](#), the one who came down for us men and for our salvation. The one who is most Wonderful, Emmanuel—El-God with us.

Jacob learned though his great struggle with God that he could not defeat this God. He also learned that this God had kept his promise, and was now blessing Jacob, taking away the old man—the Deceiver and making a new man Israel. Jacob had striven with God and had prevailed. This came as an act of God’s longstanding grace with this person who did not deserve it. It is offered to all who will by faith alone look to the Son of God, confess their sins, and say, “[Bless me, that I might know your Name and Praise the God of Israel.](#)” Not even comparable to the present Jacob gave to Esau, Christ is the greatest present a person could ever have.