



Maurice Denis, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, c. 1893.

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I’M TEACHING “THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE” to Puerto Rican STEM students. Some grew up in a church but are now ambivalent; others are hostile towards organized religion. I understand that skepticism in my bones, but don’t want to throw out the baby with the bath water. Just because people or nations turn their back on faith traditions, experience teaches that the literary and cultural afterlives of scripture leave their mark on us. I assigned journal entries, requiring only the use of personal voice and a connection to our class text. In response to student requests for models, it seemed that my periodic use

of scripture to make sense of family relations might have some value.

THIS STORY IS AN ALLEGORY ABOUT WHAT IS lost and gained by crossing borders and trying to speak truth to power. Jacob was traveling with his two wives, eleven sons, and wealth accrued during twenty years of labor in Abraham’s homeland. Jacob had to flee from his father-in-law Laban after tricking him out of his livestock and stealing household valuables. Now he must face his brother, Esau, who had vowed to kill him after Jacob stole his birthright.

After sending his family and possessions across

a river, Jacob spent the night alone on the bank. He wrestled all night with a man, perhaps an angel. When the man-gel saw that he could not overpower Jacob, he wounded his hip at daybreak and demanded that Jacob let him go. Jacob would not release him without a blessing. So the man gave Jacob a new name, Israel, which means “he struggles with God.” And Jacob-Israel walked away with a limp (Genesis 32)—a marked man.

This strikes me as a myth on the order of Sisyphus, where a human is punished for challenging a deity. Sisyphus had to push that boulder up the hill forever. But Camus says that we must see Sisyphus as happy; this was how he was marked—buff and defiant. Can being wounded by wrestling with a faith tradition constitute a blessing?

I wonder about Jacob’s blessing. One does not wrestle with a god and come away unscathed. Was the bum hip the only mark that Jacob bore? What about dragging around the name of Israel? The Israelites would forever struggle with their god, Jehovah. Their scripture describes them as a fickle people. Their “chosen people” mythology had mixed outcomes at best. But what if Jacob had been content with winning his wrestling match and released his opponent without demanding a blessing? In what ways would life have been different without the bum hip, the new name, and the “blessing” that was perhaps not so different from the rock of Sisyphus?

I have not shared the literal faith of my parents since I became a man, but their ethical structure extends to the son. Teachings from their tradition continue to inform my conscience, in the form of stories. I think of Elijah and the “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19). It was a time of famine and war, of state-sponsored terrorism and indeed of genocide. Elijah fled into the wilderness, fearing for his life. He had put to death 450 prophets of Ba’al.

Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab, promised vengeance within a day.

On Mount Horeb, Elijah waited for the voice of God. There came a great wind that “rent the mountains,” an earthquake, and finally a fire. But “the Lord was not in” the wind/ earthquake/fire. Finally, the deity spoke in a “still, small voice” emanating from a cave. The Lord asked Elijah a simple question: “What are you doing here?”

His people had forsaken their covenant, Elijah explained. As the last prophet, his life was in danger. The story leads to more bloodshed, naturally, one of many such stories that shapes my skepticism about the adaptive capacity of monotheisms and monocultures.

When I ask myself the metaphysical question, “What are you doing here?” my thinking is shaped by that scriptural tradition in which my parents raised me. It has marked me in profound ways that I no longer try to escape. I have wrestled with the faith of my father, and with his patriotism as well, and have secured a mixed blessing.

My parents, conservative Christians with a conscience, did not vote for Trump, or for any presidential candidate in 2016. In contrast to much of the religious right, their moral compass allows them to see clearly. It is their Biblical anchor that provides them with an ethical worldview, and through this lens, they are ashamed of what America has become.

But lacking faith, or at least some grounding in scriptural traditions, where would our ethics come from?

The afterlives of these two stories suggest that we have no choice but to wrestle with all we have believed in—with our preconceptions and with our leaders. More than ever, in the Society of Spectacle, we need time away from the sound and fury of the wraparound media in order to hear the “still, small voice” that our visionaries continue to suggest is nestled within each of us. ❖