ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Wrestling with God: The Narrative of Genesis 32 in "A Little East of Jordan", "Carrion Comfort" and "The Prodigal"

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July 2021

Abstract:

This article will seek to explore the elusive narrative of Genesis 32, the scene of Jacob wrestling with God, within the context of its appearance in popular literature throughout the late 19th to mid 20th centuries, utilizing in particular three poems; Emily Dickinson's "A Little East of Jordan" (1914), Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Carrion Comfort" (1885), and Elizabeth Bishop's "The Prodigal" (1951). The article will consider the intertextual use and significance of this narrative in the poetry discussed, whilst also considering the use of midrash, a mode of ancient biblical exegesis, within a modern context. The many varying aspects of the narrative of Genesis 32 will be discussed in an attempt to demonstrate the scope of interpretations this brief, yet extraordinarily ambiguous narrative can adopt, and the merit of midrashic interpretation in the context of understanding both the scriptural narrative itself and its intertextual use and significance within non-Biblical literature. This article will also attempt to ascertain the scriptural validity of the various interpretations of Genesis 32 each poem appears to adopt, and consider this in tandem with the intertextual and midrashic uses of other biblical narratives, such as The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and The Sign of the Fleece (Judges 6:37), as well as considering the intertextual use of Scripture itself, as the midrashic interpretations of the narrative of Genesis 32 slips between Old and New Testament narratives. Finally, the article will consider the significance of the intertextual use of both New and Old Testament biblical narratives within the background of the poets, as well as the wider cultural and historical contexts of the poems discussed.

In this essay I will discuss the intertextual use and the significance of the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God as it appears in Genesis 32:22-31 with reference to the poems "A Little East of Jordan" by Emily Dickinson, "Carrion Comfort" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and "The Prodigal" by Elizabeth Bishop. I will discuss the different aspects of the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God each poem adopts and consider the co-opting of midrashic vocabulary which appears throughout these poems in an attempt to demonstrate the scope of interpretations that this elusive narrative can adopt. In my discussion of each poem, I will explore how each demonstrates various interpretations of the narrative of Genesis 32, consider the scriptural validity of these interpretations and examine how various other biblical narratives are used midrashically in order to shed light on the complex and broad narrative of Genesis 32. I will also briefly draw on similarities between the biblical narrative of Jacob wrestling with God and the parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15 in relation to its intertextual use in "The Prodigal". Finally, I will consider the significance of the intertextual use of biblical narrative within the cultural and historical context of the poems discussed.

The narrative of Jacob wrestling with God as it appears in Genesis 32 is an acutely ambiguous narrative that has spawned numerous alternative interpretations. "A Little East of Jordan" may initially appear as a rather straightforward retelling of this narrative. However, close analysis of the semantics employed by Dickinson uncovers, as Wargacki describes "a pivotal index regarding Dickinson's own relationship to God and her many manifestations of that relationship found throughout her verse" (155). A common interpretation of the narrative of Genesis 32 during the 19th century, especially amongst the Amherst Trinitarians with whom Dickinson was affiliated was, as Wolff describes, "[to construe] Jacob's wrestle with God as the archetypal model for every man and woman who sincerely strive for belief" (144). In this way, the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God exemplifies the struggle of

conversion - in which the unbeliever 'wrestles' with Jesus, unready to 'give in' to conversion, an interpretation that appears apt in analysing the narratives intertextual use in "A Little East of Jordan".

The poem appears itself to 'wrestle' with many of the ambiguities in Genesis 32, particularly surrounding the identity of the stranger; a specificity which "Carrion Comfort", for example, does not appear overly concerned with. Whilst "Carrion Comfort" does not make any effort to identify the stranger in its own right, and only refers to the assailant indirectly through the protagonist's monologue, "A Little East of Jordan" makes numerous references to scripture insinuating the identity of the stranger to be that of Christ. The second line, "Evangelists record" reinforces the theory that the poem reflects the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God as an exemplification of the struggle of conversion, with the stranger being Christ, as it relates the poem to the gospels containing stories of Jesus. The setting of the poem, made explicit in its title, "A Little East of Jordan", is also significant in labelling the Christ-like identity of the stranger, as this reference identifies the location of Jesus's baptism in Matthew 3:13; "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan … to be baptized".

The relationship between the identity of the stranger and Jesus Christ elucidates the acutely human description of the figure with whom Jacob wrestles. Dickinson describes this figure initially as an "angel" (3), who, when "Jacob waxing strong […] begged permission / To Breakfast—to return […]" (6-8), giving a tangible mundanity and earthbound aspect to the stranger. Here, the traditional roles of the divine and the mortal are inverted, as the begging of permission by a divine being towards a mortal being "depicts an astonishing reversal in the divine-human hierarchy" (Wargacki, 156). The reference to "breakfast" (8) once again reinforces the idea of the figure of the stranger being presented as Jesus Christ, as Christ's ability to feel hunger in a human capacity is often regarded by theologians to be one of the aspects by which Christ shows the capacity to be simultaneously fully divine and fully

human. As Moore, for example, argues, “[i]f he was no man but simply God, who can neither hunger nor thirst nor sorrow nor die, then the whole of his life on earth was a charade” (455).

It is worth noting, however, that the figure is only referred to as a ‘Stranger’ by Jacob. In this way, in both “Carrion Comfort” and “A Little East of Jordan”, the identity of the figure of God or the Angel only appears to be important insofar as we are concerned with Jacob’s view of such. Here, both authors can be seen to adopt a midrashic approach, which, as Lovelace notes as being characteristic of midrashic interpretation, “not only engages the words of the text, behind the text, and beyond the text, but also focuses on each letter, and the words left unsaid by each line” (215). Jacob’s perception of the figure of God is the focus of the identity of the angel, an interesting inversion of Genesis 1, in which “God created man in his own image”. Here, it is, reversely, God that is being created in the image of man [Jacob]. This is not an isolated midrashic interpretation, as when describing Jacob’s mental agility in the third stanza, Dickinson describes him as “cunning Jacob” (9), which, as Wargacki suggests, “connects her protagonist to the serpent from the Garden of Eden” (156).

In “A Little East of Jordan”, although the poem concludes with Jacob left “bewildered”, the “light” that “swung the silver fleeces "Peniel" Hills beyond” (13-14), suddenly interrupts the meter of the poem, concluding with the revelation that “he had worsted God!”, and thus it is Jacob’s triumph that appears to dominate. This “light” that “swung the silver fleeces” (13) may be regarded as a midrashic interpretation of light as a marker of God’s presence and as a metaphor for Christ, as it is often referred to throughout the Bible, in both the New and Old Testaments, as well as symbolising Jacob emerging from the fight being renewed both physically, and spiritually in his relationship with God. This light similarly appears, for example, in Genesis 1:3; “and God said, Let there be light: and there was light”, Exodus 10:23; “all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings” and

John 8:12; “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life”.

As described by Alison Jack, the use of the word ‘worsted’ in particular, places Jacob in a seemingly powerful position, in which the Angel is beaten and placed in a lower position than the victorious Jacob. The outcome of the wrestle, which in parallel marks the outcome of the poem itself, places Jacob finally in the dominant position. As the light banishes the darkness, echoing the narrative of Genesis 1, in which “God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4), Jacob finds himself strong, whole and in a new relationship with God. “Carrion Comfort” however, takes a wholly different and in many ways, much darker approach to the narrative. Here, there is no real sense of completion in the wrestle between God and Jacob, and as such it is hinted that this is a not struggle which has been resolved – the phrase “now done darkness” and the present tense ‘wrestling” in the final line indicating that this struggle with God is doomed to be ever continuing. The expansion of the timeframe of Jacob’s struggle, morphing from “That night” to “that year” (13) further strengthens the hypothesis of this struggle being represented as one which is ongoing, as it is implied that this timeframe could be yet again expanded.

In the initial stanza of “Carrion Comfort”, the speaker appears to be wrestling with his own sense of faith, battling thoughts of suicide that would enable him to play God in taking his own life, thus severing the last remnants of his frail sense of faith through a definitive act of blasphemy. The speaker however, resists this urge, declaring that “these last strands of man / In me ór, most weary, cry I can no more. I can; / Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be” (2-4). The abrupt switch between “I can no more” and “I can” (3) as Hentz points out “has the overtones of the middle English "can" (to understand or know how to do something), for the sufferer no longer knows how to escape despair and has lost the intimate understanding of his God” (344). In this way, the figure with which the protagonist is

wrestling – “my God!” (14) appears to be representative of a wavering individual faith, and more broadly, a struggle between God and the faith of humanity. Dickinson’s imagery of “silver fleeces” (13), interestingly, compares to this reading, although it does not conform to the predominant interpretation of the narrative in the poem. This image echoes Judges 6:37, in which Gideon “put[s] a fleece of wool in the floor” and observes that only if “it be dry upon all the earth beside” will he “know that [God] wilt save Israel.” This mistrust of faith that Gideon exemplifies is akin to the wrestling of faith that “Carrion Comfort” describes.

This battle of faith is evident even from the initial line; “Not, I'll not, carrion comfort”, appears to question the forgiving nature of God, or even reject the malevolent nature of God. Richards offers the following interpretations; “‘I will not comfort carrion (the evil, foul, putrefying aspects of man’s nature)’ or ‘I will not comfort (aid or strengthen) contemptuous human beings’” (46). In these interpretations, it appears that through wrestling Jacob, or mankind as a whole, God is demonstrating a rejection of the evils of humanity, as the speaker appears to adopt a twofold position acting as both the figure of Jacob, and in the absence of any dialogue from the assailant, God himself.

Hopkins thus appears to insinuate that instead of the figure of the Angel being representative of Christ, as suggested by Dickinson, the struggle between Jacob and the Angel is representative of a wider struggle between faith and humanity. The figure of Jesus Christ is not, however, totally absent from the poem; the obscure verb “rude” (5), for example, as Jack describes, seems to refer to the archaic term “rood” meaning “the cross upon which Jesus suffered” or “the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith” (Rood, n.: Oxford English Dictionary) and “right foot rock” (6) is suggestive of a midrashic use of Matthew 16:18 “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church”. The “lionlimb” (6) laid against the protagonist is also suggestive of the power of a triumphant Christ, as the language is reminiscent of the language of the Beast in Revelation 13:2; “the beast which I

saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion".

It is only in the final line, "Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God" that the narrative of Genesis 32 is explicitly referred to, encouraging the reader to then reconsider the poem through the lens of that narrative. The use of "darkness" (14) here echoes the earlier Genesis 1:2; "the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep". The use of this echo in "Carrion Comfort", with the omission of the succeeding verse "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters", suggests humanity's abandonment by God, juxtaposed with His wrestle with Jacob.

Interestingly, in "Carrion Comfort", it is Jacob's weakness that is highlighted over that of the stranger differing from both the original Genesis account and "A Little East of Jordan". "All that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod" (10); toil and coil both indicate a difficult fight, and 'to kiss the rod' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "to accept chastisement or correction submissively." Jacob's only strength is bleakly shown to only be in his persistence in questioning; "Me? or me that fought him? O which one? is it each one?" (13).

In "The Prodigal" by Elizabeth Bishop, the handling of the narrative of Jacob wrestling God differs entirely from that of "Carrion Comfort" or "A Little East of Jordan". Here, the narrative makes no overt appearance, as the poem is concerned predominantly with the parable of the Prodigal Son, as the title suggests. However, there are distinct echoes of Genesis 32, specifically the reading of the narrative originally proposed by the medieval rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, in which the assailant takes the form of the spirit of Jacob's brother Esau (Schwartz et al. 329). The fractured relationship between Jacob and Esau, whom Jacob is preparing to meet in Genesis 32, is comparable to the relationship between the Prodigal Son and the elder brother in Luke 15. Just as Esau declares that Jacob "hath supplanted …two

times: took away …[his] birthright; and … taken away [his] blessing" (Genesis 27:36), the elder brother upon the return of the Prodigal Son "was angry" at his father, declaring:

> "these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf" (Luke 15:29-30).

The father figure is central to the source of contempt between the brothers in both instances.

In both the parable of the Prodigal Son and the poem itself, the wrestle between the lost son and his father bears acute similarities to the wrestle between Jacob and God. The wrestle between the Prodigal Son and his father is largely a wrestle between the Prodigal Son and his own feelings of guilt and conscience. Indeed, it is declared in the final line of "The Prodigal" that "it took him a long time finally to make up his mind to go home." In many ways, this compares to the interpretation of the narrative of Genesis 32 in "Carrion Comfort", where Jacob's wrestle with God appears indicative of a wider struggle between God and the faith of humanity.

Bishop's biographer, Brett C. Millier, noted that "'The Prodigal' speaks painfully and eloquently to her own experience with alcoholism in 1950" (230) and the narrative of Genesis 32 can be seen clearly in the poem as a biblical echo which allegorises the protagonist's (and poet's) drinking problem; "mornings after drinking bouts / (he hid the pints behind the two-by-fours)" (9-10). Just as Bishop wrestles with the seemingly all powerful and magnificent force of her alcoholism against her, Jacob wrestles with the omnipotent presence of God. It may even be that much like "A Little East of Jordan" employs the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God to exemplify the struggle of conversion, in which the unbeliever

‘wrestles’ with Jesus and is not ready to ‘give in’ to conversion, the alcoholic ‘wrestling’ with their addiction may not be ready to quit.

Another striking similarity between the parable of the Prodigal Son as it appears in “The Prodigal” and the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God, lies in the setting. Just as Jacob is left alone to wrestle God while he leaves his family safe, the loneliness and isolation of the Prodigal Son is highlighted by his company of “the sow that always ate her young” (7). “The bats' uncertain staggering flight” (25), referencing physical symptoms of staggering associated with the poet’s alcoholism, appear also to mimic Jacob’s subsequent wrestle with God; “his shuddering insights, beyond his control, touching him” (26).

In conclusion, the handling of this narrative in each poem shows a glimpse of the wide array of interpretations this elusive narrative can adopt, whilst also demonstrating the scriptural validity varying interpretations hold. The use of midrashic thought and vocabulary highlights the intertextuality between the narrative of Jacob wrestling with God and other biblical narratives, including but not limited to the Sign of the Fleece and the Prodigal Son. “The Prodigal” specifically demonstrates modern personal intertextuality with the narrative of Genesis 32. Each poem also demonstrates alternate elucidations of the identity of the assailant in the narrative, from Christ, to the Prodigal Son, to the faith of humanity itself.

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