

# STRUGGLING WITH ANGELS AND MEN

JEFFREY M. COHEN

The Book of Genesis relates three encounters that Jacob had with angels. In the first, he sees them ascending and descending a stairway that links heaven and earth (28:10-15). In the second, he meets them on his journey back to Canaan and his parental home after years of exile in the home of Laban (32:2-3). Soon afterwards, he has a third and traumatic encounter with an enigmatic being, perhaps an angel, who maims him, but from whom Jacob secures an important blessing.

The blessing appears to be a confirmation of the firstborn's blessing that was for so long at dispute between Jacob and his brother, Esau. Such a confirmation from a being who seemed to be an angelic messenger, was undoubtedly of great importance to Jacob. The matter of securing the birthright may long have caused his conscience no little unease, especially as regards the subterfuge used to secure it and, possibly, his own true entitlement to it.

These three angelic episodes are problematic to the extreme, especially if one chooses not to interpret them literally. I will attempt here, as do some modern commentators, to explain these episodes as representing an internal, psychic or spiritual struggle within the soul of father Jacob.

Let us try to understand Jacob, at this time of his life, as a man beset with a deep sense of apprehension. He is returning home after some 20 years and has to establish himself and his large family. Above all, he has to meet his brother, who has good reason to hate him and even want to kill him. God's existence and presence have been an ever-present reality to Jacob and now, more than ever, he needs God's guiding and protective hand. Can he still count on God's support?

In his troubled state of mind Jacob remembers the vision of two decades ago, of the ascending-descending angels, moving away and out of sight at one moment and coming into view at another. Now, 20 years later, as he travels home,

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the remembered vision may have seemed to him as emblematic of his sense of uncertainty as to whether he was deserving or otherwise of God's protective presence. When he took his brother's birthright had he committed an unpardonable sin? Would his brother's curse fall forever upon him or upon his mother who instigated and participated in the theft of the birthright? In his present psychic condition, the ascending angels, presumably on their way back to heaven, may have seemed to be disappearing from his life and abandoning him, leaving him to the mercy of Laban, Esau, and who knows what else?

Perhaps in the sweet light of the sun, Jacob may have had warmer and more pleasant thoughts: Perhaps it was Divinely ordained that I should get the blessing. My father too was the younger son in his family. It was clearly God's will that Isaac, my father, receive the blessing rather than the older son, Ishmael. And all those years ago, Esau willingly agreed to sell his birthright to me. And my father confirmed my blessing, even after he realized that I had tricked Esau. Perhaps, the descending angels are my guardians, coming down from heaven to reassure and protect me.

Angelic beings have always been a mystery to human beings. They were as enigmatic to Jacob as they are to us. We know not their essence, their purpose, their relationship to us. All we can do is wonder and speculate, as Jacob undoubtedly did. Could it be that this angel-beset man, throughout his 20 years of exile in Haran, remained preoccupied with the mystery of those ascending-descending angels who populated his dream-vision when he began his journey? Were they with him or against him, close or distant? He did not know, and the uncertainty was, at times, unbearable.

Now he is on his way home to Canaan and his family. When he reaches what his descendants will call the Promised Land, he again encounters angels (32:2-3). This time it is not uncertainty that grips him, but terror. He will soon encounter his brother. He fears for his life and the well being of his family. All the old doubts and feelings of guilt, inadequacy and spiritual unworthiness grasp at him. In this frame of mind, he might naturally wonder if the old curse has not been neutralized, after all. Perhaps these angels have come to implement it.

When Jacob sees the angels, he exclaims, *'This is God's camp!'* As the sages explain, the word "camp" [*machaneh*] has a military connotation, and so Jacob is justifiably frightened that these angels intend to do battle with him.

Is this camp of angels real, or is it the stuff of imagination, the imagination of a deeply troubled man? As we have supposed, Jacob is desperate to be exonerated of Divine censure, to clear his conscience of the guilt that weighs upon him because of the blessing he had taken from Esau, and to be cleansed of the unbearable pressure of the curse that his mother promised to take away from him. One does not have to be a professional psychologist to see Jacob as a man beset, suffering from psychic distress that is real and not invention. Perhaps his anxieties surface again, hypostatized in the forms of hostile angels.

And now he has his third encounter with a divine creature, perhaps an angel. It is an angry encounter, but Jacob is ready. The creature leaps on him and they struggle throughout the night. Is the aim of the battle to impose Divine retribution on Jacob for having deceived his father and supplanted his brother? We do not know. Is this just a tale? Perhaps. But not to Jacob; he wrestles with the divine being hour after hour. Neither one can get the better of the other. The struggle oscillates between victory and defeat.

To Jacob, this is no ordinary wrestling match. With all his being, he somehow understands that he is struggling with a creature sent by God to test him, and he is fighting for the meaning and worth of his life. It is not simply a matter of victory or defeat, but of accepting his guilt or asserting his righteousness. His thigh is dislocated in the struggle, and surely at times his self-doubts begin to surface. Yet he managed to cling tenaciously to his integrity and his righteousness. Jacob's growing confidence in himself finally enables him to defeat his opponent, and he demands a special gift. He will not let go of the defeated yet divine creature ' . . . *until you have blessed me!*' And Jacob receives the blessing. Now, in all his being, he knows that the curse has been removed. Jacob has been vindicated. This final angelic encounter leaves Jacob with an injured thigh. Ironically, in spite of, or perhaps because of, having been maimed, Jacob now feels *shaleim* (33:18); whole, emotionally at one with himself, exonerated, at peace.

Thus we finish with the angels. After the third encounter, Jacob's life, as far as we know, is fully human, touched always by faith in God, but not by an-

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gels. Angels appear often in the Scriptures, but our human thoughts about them and their functions and purposes are products of our God-given imagination and speculative powers. Jacob seems to have been endowed with both of these, in full measure.