

Christ is our reconciliation: a scene from an icon of peace

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Clare Amos takes time to reflect on the story of Jacob and Esau, one of the key biblical images of reconciliation.

We are privileged to have been allowed by the organisation Pax Christi to use as our cover for this issue their exquisite icon 'Christ is our Reconciliation' (It is often simply called 'the Pax Christi icon').

In its art – and indeed in its history – it encapsulates the many dimensions of reconciliation which we need and long for. It speaks of the quest for reconciliation between religions, in the Holy Land, between the sexes, between peoples of different cultures, races and languages, between the living and the dead, and between the Eastern and Western traditions of Christianity. In this short article I will attempt to draw attention to, and reflect on, the central scene depicted on the icon.¹

The reconciliation of brothers

The dominant image is that of the embrace between Jacob and Esau, a meeting which is recorded in Genesis 33.1-11. It is set immediately under the

gaze of Christ. This meeting comes at the end of a long period of alienation and Jacob's exile which had been prompted by his deception of his father Isaac, and his theft of his brother's blessing, the blessing which rightfully belonged to Esau as the firstborn. The relationship (or lack of it!) between Jacob and Esau dominates the entire 'Jacob' section of Genesis (*Genesis 25-34*). It is the most powerful expression of a theme – that of the need for harmony between brothers – which is explored throughout Genesis (Cain and Abel, the sons of Noah, Isaac and Ishmael, Joseph and his brothers).

From the time that human beings left Eden what it is to be a brother is a topic that Genesis has revisited again and again. It is almost as if the writers

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are aware that if this could be got right, then the primal relationship between human beings and God can become what it was always intended to be.

But nowhere in Genesis does ‘brotherhood’ get explored as seriously as in the story of Jacob. In part this is a reflection of the intimacy of the relationship between Jacob and Esau, not merely even full brothers, but actually twins sharing the same womb. The intensity of their relationship is what makes it particularly dangerous – as well as offering unparalleled opportunity. The rivalry between them goes back to before they were born: the two of them struggling together in their mother’s womb (*Genesis 25.22-23*).

Powerfully yet economically the author of Genesis then contrasts the two of them, both as children and later as adults, until the moment when the theft of the blessing causes Jacob to flee in fear of his life from his brother’s anger. As he returns to the land, twenty years later he is wondering – fearfully – how Esau will receive him. His initial way of dealing with the ‘situation’ is to attempt to ‘face down’ Esau by a deceptive show of strength – or at least wealth. But he is soon forced to discover another way.

We cannot fully understand the story of the meeting and reconciliation of Jacob and Esau told in Genesis 33 unless we realise its intimate connection with the events of the previous night,



The 'Jacob and Esau' panel from the icon Christ is our reconciliation

when Jacob had wrestled through the night with a mysterious, but clearly divine, figure, had been wounded in the hip, but had also been granted the blessing of a new name. The connection between the two events is made clear by the vocabulary – the word ‘face’ echoes through both episodes drawing out links that are powerful and profound.

Up to this point Jacob has been a ‘behind’ sort of person – he is even called by the name ‘Jacob’, because it means ‘heel’. The word has the same negative



Rembrandt, Jacob's struggle with the angel

connotation in biblical Hebrew as it does in modern English. It emphasises the way

that Jacob 'supplanted' (literally 'came up on the heel and overtook') his brother

Esau (*Genesis 27.36*). Jacob had always found it difficult to look his brother in the face. He is going to be forced to change. For in his fight with the divine assailant at Peniel he acknowledges that he has seen God 'face to face' (*Genesis 32.30*). There is an intriguing painting of this scene by Rembrandt (see illustration opposite). In this painting Jacob is held by the wrestler in such a way that his head is gradually being forced round so that he is compelled to look his opponent in the face. He will not be allowed to avoid confronting his past, his present and his future. Rembrandt has here caught the heart of the story.

Jacob's struggle is a long one, in which he is wounded – a wound which will endure to the end of his life, and which will also affect the lives of his descendants (*Genesis 32.32*), yet at the end of the contest the new name he is granted both marks the end (we hope!) of the old 'behind' Jacob, and grants him and his descendants the terrifying honour of being named as Israel – the one who strives with God.

The struggle and the blessing

Who exactly is this mysterious assailant who has effected such a change in Jacob? Rabbinic tradition suggested that the divine figure with whom Jacob wrestled was the guardian angel of the Edomite nation. For just as *Genesis* evokes the way that Jacob becomes

(through this encounter) the ancestor of Israel, so too it makes clear that Esau is the ancestor of Edom (see *Genesis 36.1*). This is in fact not simply a 'family story' of a struggle between two brothers, but of a contest between two rival and often hostile nations, Israel and Edom. That is made crystal clear in the story itself – see, for example, the oracle offered to Rebecca when she was pregnant with the twins ('Two nations are in your womb', *Genesis 25.23*).

So this struggle acts as a powerful prelude to the meeting of Jacob and Esau the very next morning. It is a meeting which takes place after the sun has finally risen – careful commentators have noticed that this is the first time we are told of the sun rising since it set more than twenty years before when Jacob approached Bethel on his journey into exile (*Genesis 28.11*). It has been a very long night. Yet the graciousness with which Esau then greets Jacob, and the words with which Jacob responds to this greeting offer hope of a new future. It is this scene that is being shown on the Pax Christi icon. Sometimes English translations obscure the connections which Jacob/Israel is making with his experiences of the previous night, for he states, 'If I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour.' (*Genesis 33.10*)

“It is, as the scene suggests, only when we are reconciled with our brothers and sisters, that the ladder can link earth to heaven.”

With these words we discover the truth that Jacob has just learned. It is only if we are prepared to continue our struggle with God that we can see our ‘brothers’ in their true light, as God sees them. Conversely it is when we wrestle for a more authentic relationship with our brothers and sisters we discover that we are given God’s blessing. Our relationship with God and that with our brothers belong together and woe beside us if we try to separate them. If we do our faith has ceased to be biblical. The author of 1 John expresses this in a vivid passage that may actually be alluding to the story of Jacob and Esau: ‘Those who say, “I love God”, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen’ (1 John 4.20–21). Does not Jesus’ parable of the Elder and Younger Brother (Luke 15.10–32) which has probably been coloured by the Old Testament traditions of Jacob and Esau, express something of this in pictorial form?

But Jacob’s dealings with Esau also impinge on relationships other than those of blood kin, or even (as with 1 John) of members of the same close knit

religious community. Genesis itself encourages us to realise this by that link made between Esau and the nation of Edom. The triangle of relationships between Jacob/Israel, the divine wrestler and Esau/Edom appears to suggest that the vocation of ‘Israel’ is to wrestle both with God and with the world of national and political reality in which God’s people found and find themselves. If Israel turns its back on either a relationship with God or a relationship with the ‘foreign nations’ (symbolised by Esau/Edom) then it becomes less than Israel. It is both a challenge to a glib secularism, and a statement that biblical faith must be worked out in the world, rather than become a flight from it. It is, and will be, a struggle. But only in the struggle will be the blessing. That is the mystery of Israel.

That rabbinic legend that the divine figure with whom Jacob wrestled was the guardian angel of the Edomite nation states an important truth. Our enemies, such as Edom historically became in the history of Israel, have their place in God’s scheme, and their divine protectors: and we cannot be reconciled with God without also being reconciled with them. It is, as the scene

on the icon suggests, only when we are reconciled with our brothers and sisters, that the ladder can link earth to heaven.

The mystery of Israel

Space here does not allow me to explore in detail who exactly is 'Israel'. Certainly it is true that part of the power of the story of the reconciliation of Esau and Jacob/Israel comes from its obvious potential link to the tensions and pain found in the modern Middle East, and the need for reconciliation there. It is no accident I suspect that such a powerful visual statement was actually created by a religious community resident in the Holy Land – at a Melchite (Greek Catholic) monastery of St John the Baptist at Ein Kerem, near Jerusalem. Yet if Christians choose to refer to themselves as 'a New Israel' (see *Galatians* 6.16) then the vocation of struggling both with God and God's world belongs no less to them. The story of struggling Jacob then stands in theological continuity with the great Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (*Matthew* 25.31–46), which makes it clear that the face of God's Christ is to be seen in the hungry and those who are alien or

'other' to us. Genesis' great themes of human beings as the image (icon) of God and the struggle for brotherhood come together in the moving words of the Arab Christian Palestinian writer Elias Chacour:

The true icon is your neighbour, the human being who has been created in the image and with the likeness of God. How beautiful it is when our eyes are transfigured and we see that our neighbour is the icon of God, and that you, and you, and I – we are all the icons of God. How serious it is when we hate the image of God, whoever that may be, whether a Jew or a Palestinian. How serious it is when we cannot go and say, 'I am sorry about the icon of God who was hurt by my behaviour.' We all need to be transfigured so we can recognise the glory of God in one another.²

I hope to have the opportunity, during early 2006, of exploring other scenes from the Pax Christi icon on the new *Rethinking Mission* website www.rethinkingmission.org

Notes:

¹To explore the theme of brotherhood, reconciliation and the story of Jacob and Esau in more detail see, Clare Amos, *The Book of Genesis*, Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004.

²Elias Chacour *We Belong to the Land*, Collegeville: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, p.46-47.