

GETTING DUSTY WITH THE DIVINE:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM JACOB'S DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty
of the School of Theology at Mercer University
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF DIVINITY

Atlanta, GA

2024

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DEDICATION

*This thesis is dedicated to all who wrestle with the biblical text. May you endure until you get
your blessing.*

May you reclaim it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dr. Garber. I have always said that perhaps my biggest reason for coming to seminary was my love for talking about stories. It has been a joy to talk about the story of Jacob with you for over a year. Whether our meetings have been over Zoom with a three-hour time difference when I lived in Seattle or in your office with Darth Vader peering over my shoulder, it has been a delight! Thank you, thank you for your support, encouragement, revisions, and the many rabbit holes we went down along the way.

To Dr. Parker. Your hand has touched a little bit of everything in this project—from editing my formatting to helping me engage womanist scholarship to translating some Greek (and even Hebrew!) with me. Thank you for your influence on my academic and personal sojourn with this text.

To Beth Perry. Where would the world be without dedicated librarians? Not only did you help me brainstorm my earliest ideas about my thesis topic, but your research expertise was crucial in my learning process. Thank you.

To my parents, Mike and Gina Cellino. My earliest memories contain you both instilling in me a love for God and the Bible. And ever since I was making up stories when I was eight years old, you have believed in my ability to write. This paper is a testament to your prayers for my walk with God and your unwavering support as I discover my voice through writing.

To my husband, Will Hong. You have witnessed my wrestle with the text firsthand. Thank you for never complaining about my 5 am alarms and, more importantly, honing your skills as a barista during this season of our marriage. A good portion of this paper was written with one of your lattes next to me. Although this project has mostly brought me excitement over new discoveries, I have also had frustration and occasional tears. You have accepted all of my

emotions and listened to me with kindness. Now and forever, I am grateful to be fully seen and loved by you.

And finally, to all of my friends and colleagues who have walked with me in my writing journey in ways both big and small. I have been impacted by all of your stories and experiences. I am blessed to know you. Thank you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Thesis Question	2
Definitions and Assumptions	3
Methodology	5
Historical Background	7
2. SACRED IMAGINATION AND A SUMMARY OF JACOB’S LIFE	10
What is Mysticism?	10
Reading the Bible from a Mystical Perspective	10
Learning from Christian Mystics of the 16th Century	15
A Summary of Genesis 28-31	16
3. GETTING DUSTY WITH THE DIVINE	24
Beginning, Taking, and Crossing	24
And He Wrestled with the $\psi\prime\aleph$ ('š)	27
The Breaking of the Dawn	29
Prevailing, Blessing, and Naming	33
Healing and Injury	35
4. INTERWEAVING ST. JOHN, JACOB, AND DISABILITY STUDIES	39
The Phases of Purgation in the Jacob Narrative	39
A Delightful Wound	47
Disability in the Jacob Story	50
5. WHAT CAN THIS MEAN FOR THE EX-VANGELICAL?	54
Implications of the Study	54
Statistics on Religious Affiliation in the United States	57
Phases of Purgation for the Ex-vangelical	58
Areas for Further Study	62

TABLE OF CONTENTS (*continued*)

Closing Thoughts	64
REFERENCES	65

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Phases of Purgation in the Jacob Narrative	40
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ABSTRACT

MIA CELLINO HONG

GETTING DUSTY WITH THE DIVINE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM JACOB'S DARK
NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Under the direction of DAVID G. GARBER, JR., Ph. D.

This thesis project will answer the question: In what ways does Jacob's experience at the Jabbok in Gen 32 demonstrate a dark night of the soul? This question will be further developed into these three subquestions: (1) How does a reception history of the Christian mystical tradition read the Jacob narratives in a way that sets the stage for a dark night of the soul as described by St. John of the Cross? (2) How does a literary/rhetorical reading of Gen 32 open up possibilities for a mystical interpretation of this story? And, lastly (3) How do St. John's writings and Jacob's story interweave together to determine precisely how Jacob received the wound that resulted in his blessing? The primary methodology for answering these questions will be reception history and reader response criticism. Additionally, findings from disability and queer commentaries of this text assist in drawing the conclusion that Jacob's nighttime encounter was a dark night of the soul, making it a valuable text for Christians leaving evangelicalism.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At some point in their lives, many Christians, along with other religiously affiliated persons, experience a period of uncertainty about God or perceive an estrangement from God. This stretch of time is what Christian mystic St. John of the Cross¹ described as a “dark night of the soul.” A dark night of the soul presents itself in various forms based on the individual. It could be an identity crisis when one questions one’s place in the world, purpose in life, or belief in the Divine. Perhaps also, an identity crisis can come at a natural crossroads when one is forced to come face-to-face with their past that they strove to run away from at all costs. It can be a period of reflection when one looks back on one’s life and questions the decisions that were made. For others, it can mark a season of intense fear or a loss of faith. Christians who find themselves in a dark night of the soul can find value in the ambiguity of the story of Jacob in the Hebrew Bible.

The theme of struggle and wrestling weaves its way throughout the entire Jacob narrative in Genesis. It begins in Rebekah’s womb when Jacob and his twin, Esau, “struggled together within her.”² Before Jacob was even born, he struggled and wrestled. He was named יַעֲקֹב (*ya‘qōb*), heel grasper, on the day of his birth, foreshadowing his attempt and eventual success of

¹ From this point forward, I will refer to St. John of the Cross as “St. John.”

² Gen 25:23. All English scripture citations will be in the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) unless otherwise noted. Additionally, since in Chapter 3 I will translate this text from the Hebrew, I will use the versification from the Masoretic text throughout this entire paper. Most English translations have one less verse, shifting them from the Hebrew by one verse (e.g. in most English translations, what is marked as v. 23 in the Hebrew is marked v. 22 in the English).

obtaining Esau's birthright and blessing later in his story.³ But his struggle was not just with Esau. In his life, he also struggled with his father to secure his blessing, his future father-in-law to marry his favorite daughter, his two wives in their fertility battles, and eventually, God⁴ at the Jabbok.⁵

Thesis Question

There are numerous readings of the events of Gen 32:23-33 due to the sheer mystery of the story. What happened, who was this man at the river, how did he have the authority to issue Jacob a new name, and how did Jacob leave defeated and blessed at the same time? In this paper, I will suggest one reading of this story: it is a biblical depiction of a dark night of the soul.

Therefore, I will pose the question: In what ways does Jacob's experience at the Jabbok in Gen 32 demonstrate a dark night of the soul? The following three subquestions will guide my analysis: How does a reception history of the Christian mystical tradition read the Jacob narratives in a way that sets the stage for a dark night of the soul as described by St. John? How does a literary/rhetorical reading of Gen 32 open up possibilities for a mystical interpretation of this story? And how do St. John's writings and Jacob's story interweave together to determine precisely how Jacob received the wound that resulted in his blessing? The implication of this project is to determine how Jacob's dark night of the soul parallels with the experiences of Christians leaving evangelicalism, or ex-vangelicals, who grapple with their ever-evolving identity and relationship with God in their own dark nights of the soul. These Christians may,

³ Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1-25A*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2018), 30.

⁴ I will allude to Jacob's nighttime adversary often in this paper. I will refer to him as "God" or "an angel" interchangeably.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

like Jacob, wrestle with God. They may also obtain a wound. Yet they will be blessed because of their journey and eventually return “home,” although that home may not be the same as what they left behind.

Definitions and Assumptions

The phrase “dark night of the soul” originates from sixteenth-century Christian mystic St. John from his book entitled *The Dark Night of the Soul*. This book is a “line-by-line exposition of the eight stanzas of his poem ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ that he wrote while he was imprisoned at Toledo.”⁶ The poem illustrates an individual’s spiritual journey. It is inspired by the Song of Solomon, “presenting the Christian as a lover passionately seeking union with Christ.”⁷ He analyzes the first two stanzas of his poem in the majority of the book. He describes the dark night as God leading “those whom [God] desires to purify from [imperfections] so that [God] may bring them farther onward.”⁸ No one chooses to enter into a dark night of the soul; God leads them to it. The dark night is, in many ways, a necessary roadblock on one’s spiritual journey. But it is a roadblock that must be pushed through because there is freedom and joy that can be found on the other side.

A dark night of the soul does not have to equate to a negative or evil experience. St. John illustrates it as *la noche oscura*, meaning an obscure night.⁹ Contemporary interpreters may be tempted to interpret darkness as profound depression or confusion. While this could be the case,

⁶ Saint John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003), Kindle edition, 6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ Gerald G. May, *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 66.

St. John maintains that a dark night of the soul is “a secret way in which God not only liberates [people] from [their] attachments and idolatries, but also brings [them] to the realization of [their] true nature.”¹⁰ Through St. John’s work, I will connect the experiences of both Jacob and ex-vangelicals with the characteristics of a dark night of the soul.

Jacob’s life leading up to the pinnacle moment of his wrestling at the Jabbok involved scheming, exile from his homeland, constant tension in his married family, and his eventual return to his brother and old life. After his nighttime encounter, he left changed, with the name Israel and a limp. The result of his “dark night” was his reconciliation with Esau and a renewed sense of purpose. Along with that, ex-vangelicals might go through phases of feeling separated from God despite their efforts to draw near to God. The typical Christian spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, fasting, and engaging with the faith community do little to comfort the ex-vangelical in their dark night of the soul. As a result, they feel alienated or as if God does not love them anymore. Yet if they endure in their dark night, continuing to wrestle and question and give their doubts to God, they will also emerge blessed like Jacob. The result of their dark night is a divine union with God.

One major assumption I have for this study is that my audience assumes a Christian theological framework. In my exegesis in Chapter 3, I will utilize the Hebrew language while simultaneously asking myself: “What would St. John, along with other Christian mystics, say about this text?” My target audience is Christians who are in their own dark night of the soul. More specifically, this paper will address the Christians with White evangelical backgrounds who are no longer satisfied with simplistic readings of scripture and fixed beliefs about God’s

¹⁰ Ibid., 66-67.

character. It is my hope that my thesis will be helpful to my readers and that amid their struggle with God and evangelical Christianity, they can find themselves in this story, too.

Methodology

In order to answer my thesis question, I will use reception history and reader response criticism to uncover how the sixteenth-century Christian mystics interpreted this story.¹¹ In doing so, I will discover how a more contemporary audience can benefit from the narrative of Jacob's wrestling. I am choosing the angle of reception history because it shifts the focus less on the author's original intentions and more on the reader's response to a specific text.¹² Since the stories from Genesis were told first through oral tradition and then later written down during Babylonian exile, there is little information on the individuals who authored Genesis. Reader response theory hones in on the readers' insights, celebrating and embracing that there are many ways to evaluate a single story.¹³ The quest for one single explanation is neither the goal nor is it attainable.

One major benefit to reader response theory is that it "provides a useful approximation of the early reception of biblical materials, especially when limited or contradictory data preclude an informed theory of authorial intention."¹⁴ I am choosing to analyze this story from the lens of

¹¹ Additionally, this paper will not go into the source critical composition. I am assuming the book of Genesis has a complex history of composition. In my exegesis of Jacob's life, I will not classify what sections are from the Priestly source, Yahwist source, etc.

¹² Margaret Davies, "Reader Response Criticism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R.J. Coogins and J.L. Houlden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 578.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 579.

¹⁴ Randall C. Webber, "Reader Response Criticism," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 738.

St. John and the Christian mystical tradition. I am strictly studying how the tradition has been received and how the history of reception can open new avenues of meaning. The Christian mystical tradition understands the Hebrew Bible from an angle that can be both beneficial and thought-provoking to contemporary readers who desire to understand the text from a transcendental perspective.

Along with reception history and reader response criticism, I will also read Gen 32:23-33 and St. John's writings while acknowledging my own context as a cis-gender, heterosexual, White woman. I am also a recently self-proclaimed ex-vangelical. As I exegete the Hebrew text and put it into conversation with St. John, I recognize that my hermeneutics are affected by the body I inhabit. I have had both disadvantages in evangelical spaces because of my gender, as well as privilege due to my race and sexuality. Likewise, my profound interest in this topic stems from my personal dark night of the soul that began on the tail end of my time in evangelical Christianity. I will conclude my thesis in Chapter 5 by demonstrating how St. John's phases of purgation in a dark night of the soul manifest in the life of an emerging ex-vangelical. These manifestations come from my own experiences, as well as what I have witnessed among my ex-vangelical peers.

Lastly, in Chapter 4, I will engage with disability studies as I examine how Jacob's wound and blessing occurred at the exact same moment. The theme of disability among God's people is striking in the Hebrew Bible. I have found that one of the most prominent conversations between a human and God about disability in the Hebrew Bible is in Exod 4:11. Here, Moses tells God he cannot accept God's call to deliver the Israelites because he was "slow of speech and slow of tongue." God's immediate response is that God can control Moses's speech and tongue. God is the provider of all human faculties. Speaking, hearing, and seeing are

mentioned in the following verses, as these were the primary senses Moses would require to bring the Israelites to freedom.¹⁵ In Rabbinic literature, the soul was just as important as the body, as both work together to encompass a complete human being.¹⁶ I hold this view of disability—that both soul and body are connected with God controlling all faculties—as I observe the Jacob narrative. Jacob acquired a disability at the Jabbok. He was both blessed and limping as the dawn arose on his dark night.

Historical Background

Mystical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible allow readers to explore the ambiguity and mystery behind the ancient stories passed down by the Israelites. Mysticism “generally refers to claims of immediate knowledge of ultimate reality (whether or not this is called ‘God’) by direct personal experience [and] ‘mystical theology’ is used to mean the study of mystical phenomena.”¹⁷ Mystical experiences can happen in a variety of ways, according to each individual. In some cases, the experience can result in “a sense of unification with the divine or of losing oneself into ‘the void’ or ‘the infinite.’”¹⁸ For others, it is “an experience of intimate fellowship with God that leaves [the] personality intact, [but with] visions, auditions, trances, and states of ecstasy.”¹⁹ I have chosen this approach to interpret the events of Gen 32 because

¹⁵ Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bavli*, 1st ed., (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 112; Exod 4:14-17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁷ "mysticism, mystical theology," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), par 1.

¹⁸ Helmer Ringgren, "Mysticism," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary: K–N*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (Doubleday: Yale University Press, 1992), 945.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

spirituality and one's understanding of God is, in many ways, a mystical experience. Faith develops through one's own revelations. It is personal and often defies logic.

The Christian mystical tradition dates back to Plato in the fourth century, but the works of the sixteenth-century mystics will guide this paper.²⁰ St. John was one of the great Carmelite mystics of the sixteenth century, along with St. Teresa of Avila.²¹ St. John was born in 1542 in Fontiveros, Spain.²² He was born into a poor family, entered the Carmelite monastery of Medina del Campo at age twenty-one, and was eventually ordained a priest at age twenty-five.²³ It is in that same year he meets St. Teresa of Avila, and he then joined her Discalced Reform.²⁴

John and Teresa maintained similar outlooks on their thoughts on the soul. They both held the belief that God is in the center of one's soul and that communicating with God through prayer and the senses is how one can not only be most aligned with God but also with one's very self.²⁵ Thus John and Teresa consider a dark night of the soul not as an evil process, but as a secret way God "brings [one] to the realization of [one's] true nature."²⁶

²⁰ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2007), 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

²² Jesudas Athyal, "John of the Cross, St.," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), par 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Saint John of the Cross, *The Essential St. John of the Cross: Ascent of Mount Carmel; Dark Night of the Soul, A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ; Twenty Poems by St. John of the Cross*, ed. Paul A. Boer, Sr., (Houston: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2013), Kindle edition, chap. 4, par. 13.

²⁵ May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 53.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

It is for this reason that I have chosen to put St. John in conversation with the Jacob narrative. A mystical reading of Jacob's experience at the Jabbok (and his life as a whole) is appropriate because there is a connection between St. John's writings about the phases of purgation in a dark night of the soul and Jacob's life events. Additionally, St. John describes a "sacred wound" in detail in his poem "Living Flame of Love," which also corresponds with the wound Jacob acquired at the Jabbok. I will carefully consider these details in my exegesis, providing an additional reading of this story with the aid of both the ancient Hebrew and Greek languages and the bright scholars who have also examined this tale.

CHAPTER 2

SACRED IMAGINATION AND A SUMMARY OF JACOB'S LIFE

What is Mysticism?

The task of defining mysticism is, in a way, the task of defining the undefinable. Robert A. Herrera suggests that mysticism “unveils a hidden meaning, [holding] the promise of experiencing and tasting a hidden truth [and] attaining knowledge surpassing intellectual cognition.”²⁷ He goes further to say that in “mystical contemplation, God infuses knowledge quietly and secretly in darkness to material things.”²⁸ This evokes an image of uncovering hidden treasure. Ultimately, mysticism is communion with God, being conscious of the Divine Presence—a consciousness beyond what is tangibly seen or understood.²⁹ This meta-consciousness involves the imagination, reflection, and seeking new discoveries. Discovering something that has yet to be discovered requires the discipline of sitting in the unknown, pondering, and even denying the previous comfort that came with one’s old set of values, ideas, or habits. Unlike established Christian evangelical biblical interpretations, there are no definite interpretations or black-and-white answers in Christian mysticism.

Reading the Bible from a Mystical Perspective

One can gain many insights through reading the Bible from a mystical perspective. In the words of Grace Jantzen: “It is by imaginative entry into the mystical sense of scripture that the

²⁷ Robert A. Herrera, *Silent Music: the Life, Work, and Thought of Saint John of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁹ Celia Kourie, “Reading Scripture through a Mystical Lens,” *Acta Theologica* (2011): 137.

love and grace of God can be encountered.”³⁰ It is a skill to tap into one’s imagination, especially for adults who are far removed from their childhood. It is tempting, particularly for evangelical Christians, to desire to seek out one true meaning of a Bible story. When evangelicals insist upon a singular meaning to a biblical text, it creates order in their worldview. To put it candidly, engaging the Bible with a narrow focus is easier. Using less nuance and disregarding other voices that disrupt the normalized voices of the White male evangelicals makes preaching and teaching the Bible easier. It makes biblical interpretation far less complicated for those with the power to preach and teach. This framework does a disservice not only to the people who are overlooked but also to Christianity as a whole, because a well-rounded outlook on scripture inevitably gifts Christians a more substantial picture of the heart of God.

Walter Brueggemann and Wilda Gafney both touch on the concept of imaginative reading. Brueggemann describes imagination as “the capacity to generate images of reality that are not rooted in the world in front of us.”³¹ His work on prophetic imagination suggests that the ancient prophets were imaginers, and those who read their works continue to be imaginers after them.³² This does not mean that the prophets were unconcerned with reality. Nevertheless, they held historical reality into consideration with image and metaphor.³³ This pairing aided in their understanding of God’s character. God’s divinity and mystique required, and still require, reverence paired with participatory imagination.

³⁰ Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82.

³¹ Walter Brueggemann, “PART THREE The Jacob Narrative: The Conflicted Call of God,” in *Genesis* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2010), 25.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ *Ibid.*

Likewise, Wilda Gafney's work involves the marriage of traditional Jewish midrash and womanist biblical hermeneutics. Midrash engages the words of the text, focusing both on the words said and unsaid, and addresses questions elicited by the text.³⁴ Gafney combines Jewish midrash with the African-American Christian interpretation of "sanctified imagination." She classifies this as womanist midrash, defined as "a set of interpretive practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation, that attends to marginalized characters in biblical narratives, especially women and girls."³⁵ Sanctified imagination tells the story between the lines on the page, and it is also a form of reader-response criticism.³⁶ Gafney uses the ideas that Samson's hair was in dreadlocks, or that Rachel was an athletic woman with long legs as examples.³⁷

The practice of imagination reminds me of children who enjoy playing make-believe. A young child who treasures her baby doll uses her imagination to carefully observe how her mother loves her and her siblings. Even though the child is not a mother, her imagination can teach her abstract concepts such as love, compassion, and care from a very young age. Over time, her imagination can give her discernment on how to orient herself in the world. In the same way, having a strong theological imagination allows a reader of Scripture to engage his/her mind,

³⁴ Vanessa Lovelace, "Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne, Written by Wilda C. Gafney," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 40, no. 2 (2018): 212.

³⁵ Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

positioning a story in a way that is relevant to his/her current situation. Imagination frees Scripture to be more than “a rehearsal and translation of tradition.”³⁸

In other words, imagination is an aspect of the esoteric side of religion. This is generally known as mysticism, “which is based upon the direct personal observation and experience of the deeper aspects of Reality with which one has united or become ‘at one’ with.”³⁹ The esoteric side of religion contrasts with the exoteric. The exoteric side of religion is tradition, “the long and time-tested experience of many men and women under supervision,” while the esoteric side is “direct personal vision and experience in higher states of consciousness.”⁴⁰ Both are equally important. Nonetheless, my focus is on mysticism or the esoteric reading. Our understanding of God and Jesus as Christians comes from this give and take: honing in on the traditions passed down through the generations to hear from God (such as public worship, communion, and scripture reading) while simultaneously adopting an active awareness of the esoteric, mystical, intangible qualities of God revealed through prayer, fasting, dreams, and so on.

Another way to look at this is to consider the fourfold meanings of scripture developed by John Cassian (360-435). They are the historical (literal) sense, tropological (moral) sense, allegorical (typological) sense, and the anagogical (mystical) sense.⁴¹ These senses develop a broader assortment of scriptural interpretation compared to, for instance, Origen’s two-fold sense

³⁸ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 20.

³⁹ Manuella Dunn-Mascetti, *Christian Mysticism*, 1st ed., (New York: Hyperion, 1998), 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹ Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill, and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches*, (Farham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), Ebook, 122.

of scripture: historical and spiritual/allegorical.⁴² While Cassian’s four senses are distinct, they can also overlap. For example, Ewert Cousins suggests that the scriptural reading practice of *lectio divina* is allegorical.⁴³ *Lectio Divina* takes a particular passage and reads it at four different levels, expecting to discover a personalized or hidden meaning within the story. Similarly, a “mystical hermeneutic of scripture is one in which a direct experience with God, or Ultimate Reality, or the One is the end result.”⁴⁴ Mystical and allegorical readings of the text breathe life into it, demonstrating words that are “living and active”⁴⁵—a concept that is familiar to many Christians.

This ancient way of understanding scripture is the antithesis of the evangelical standard that the Bible is the source of ultimate religious authority.⁴⁶ This cannot be the case, because there is a vast diversity of biblical hermeneutics. I take insights from womanist, feminist, queer, and disability hermeneutics because these embodied hermeneutics contrast sharply to evangelical hermeneutics. There is a fear of the body and a distinct separateness between the body and the mind in evangelical interpretation.⁴⁷

⁴² Kourie, “Reading Scripture through a Mystical Lens,” 139.

⁴³ Nelstrop, *Christian Mysticism*, 132.

⁴⁴ Kourie, “Reading Scripture through a Mystical Lens,” 141.

⁴⁵ Heb 4:12.

⁴⁶ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 12.

⁴⁷ David Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity*, (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2020), 115.

Learning from Christian Mystics of the 16th Century

Before engaging with a mystical reading of Gen 32, it is first crucial to acknowledge the context in which the Spanish, 16th-century Christian mystics understood their beings in relation to God. Both St. John and St. Teresa of Avila viewed introspection, interiority, and selfhood in their writings, as these are three fundamental aspects of Christian mysticism.⁴⁸ Likewise, the mystics' views on the human soul are intricately connected with their relationship with God. Understanding oneself, engaging in introspection, esoterically reading Scripture, and prayer are all interconnected. For St. Teresa, she viewed her soul as an interior castle that she had to penetrate.⁴⁹ God is in the center of the soul, and the spiritual journey consists of discovering God through intentionally moving from the outer, sensory realm.⁵⁰ Gerald May illustrates a circle within a larger circle, similar to a labyrinth, to describe this concept. The outside of the labyrinth is the physical, tangible world of the senses. The inner part of the labyrinth represents God in the center of every human soul. St. John maintained similar views on the soul.⁵¹

St. John suggests that people on a spiritual journey will undergo a dark night of the soul. This journey results in complete transformation, or an “old self” and a “new self.” The old self is engulfed in the world. He is an ““animal man,’ who lives by appetite and suffers from a blunting of the mind.”⁵² But then an evolution occurs. The old self dies a rather uncomfortable death, is

⁴⁸ Shlomo Biderman, “Mystical Identity and Spiritual Justification,” in *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*, ed. Steven T. Katz, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ May, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 53.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Herrera, *Silent Music*, 53.

cleansed, and the new self emerges. This new self is more in tune with their inner world, has a sharper clarity of mind, and is ultimately more connected with God. This new self has made it to the other side of their dark night of the soul.

In this paper, I will suggest Jacob's encounter with the man at the Jabbok marked the very end of his dark night of the soul, particularly when the dawn rises and he receives his lifetime injury. Since this is the end of his dark night of the soul, I will first highlight where his dark night began, which is his first divine nighttime encounter in Gen 28.

A Summary of Genesis 28-31

With all of this in consideration, I will define my posture in reading Gen 32. First, I must acknowledge the events of Jacob's life that led to his nocturnal battle with the unknown man. Jacob's life story is marked by struggle before he was even born. He first struggles, רָצַע (*rāša'*) with Esau in Rebekah's womb in Gen 25:23. The root of this word is jarring, meaning "to crush or oppress." Jacob and Esau are described to be crushing one another, and this only continued outside the womb and into their adult lives.⁵³ He came out of the womb grasping Esau's heel, thus securing for himself the name יַעֲקֹב (*ya'qōb* - Jacob), heel grasper.

Esau establishes his familial role as the hunter. Jacob, in contrast, is more quiet and passive, preferring to spend his time among the tents with his mother.⁵⁴ Jacob successfully obtains Esau's birthright when he catches him in a vulnerable moment, as Esau insists that a hot meal is a worthy trade for a birthright.⁵⁵ While receiving Esau's birthright appeared to be

⁵³ William Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 346.

⁵⁴ Gen 25:27.

⁵⁵ Gen 25:33-34.

seemingly effortless for Jacob, he schemes with Rebekah in Isaac's old age to acquire Esau's blessing.⁵⁶ Therefore, Jacob strives for and receives Esau's birthright and blessing, despite being the younger son.

After Jacob receives his blessing from Isaac, Esau is understandably enraged. So, Jacob sets out for Harran. Jacob's banishment marks the beginning of his dark night of the soul, which will last until Gen 32 when he wrestles the angel. In Gen 28, he has a trance-like dream at Bethel in which he sees a stairway set on the earth and reaching up to heaven.⁵⁷ He then hears from the Lord, who declares that Bethel is a holy place. God continues to say that Jacob and his descendants will inherit that land, multiply, and be blessed both by Jacob and his children.⁵⁸ Jacob wakes up and proclaims Bethel as the house of God.

The stairway סֹלָמַיִם (*sulām*) serves as "a symbol of the accessibility of God's help and presence, a theme distinctive to the Jacob stories."⁵⁹ It is not a stairway that Jacob himself ascends and descends—for it is only God and God's agents who can walk on the stairway. Yet Jacob, the human, can see the stairway and access help from God's angels in his times of need.⁶⁰ This is the first time in Jacob's recorded life that he shows any regard for God and the religiosity of his father and grandfather. Thus, he was entranced by his divine intervention as he fled from

⁵⁶ Gen 27:1-31.

⁵⁷ Gen 28:12.

⁵⁸ Gen 28:14-15; The Hebrew word בָּרַךְ (*brk* – bless) is used here at the end of v. 16. בָּרַךְ (*brk* – bless) is also written in Gen 32:27, 30. A blessing is involved in both of Jacob's nighttime experiences: the promise of blessing in Gen 28, and Jacob's actual blessing in Gen 32.

⁵⁹ Stanley D. Walters, "Jacob Narrative," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary: H-J*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 602.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

“his land and people, and he was sufficiently moved to acknowledge God’s presence and to perform religious acts.”⁶¹

Jacob’s first divine nocturnal experience in Gen 28 begins his arduous journey in which he does not get his way like he was used to. He fought his way to receive his birthright and blessing despite being the youngest child, and then he had an amazing experience with God in his dream at Bethel. Yet, in Gen 29-31, he endures hardship under the control of his father-in-law, Laban. In many ways, Jacob experiences exile. He is dependent on Laban for over fourteen years, working tirelessly under his watchful eye, while also witnessing the complicated birth processes of his wives Leah and Rachel. Jacob had control over his life from birth until Isaac’s blessings. Jacob has far less control over his life during his exile. His possessions are not solely his, Rachel struggles with her fertility, and his promising moment with God in Gen 28 was a mere blip in comparison to the many years of unknown that was his life at Laban’s estate.

In Gen 29, he finds Rachel with relative ease and receives a loving embrace from her father, Laban.⁶² Jacob and Laban’s relationship starts off with seemingly mutual care and respect. Even though Jacob is a blood relative, Laban insists that he pay Jacob for his labors.⁶³ Jacob, who was used to fighting for what he wanted, demands that his pay for his hard-earned work is marriage to Rachel after seven years.⁶⁴ Laban agreed. After the seven years pass,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² v. 14.

⁶³ v. 15.

⁶⁴ v. 19.

however, Laban tricks Jacob by giving him Leah, his other daughter. Jacob sleeps with her and realizes it is not Rachel with whom he slept with until he sees her in the morning light.⁶⁵

Jacob's realization the morning after his wedding festivities is a distinct moment in the middle of his dark night of the soul. The theme of trickery in the darkness is evident in Jacob's entire narrative. First, Jacob tricked his father, Isaac, in the darkness when he deceived him in Gen 27:19-41. Isaac was blind at the time, he favored his firstborn Esau, and he thought he was giving Esau his blessing as his firstborn. The parallel between this event and Laban's trap in Gen 29 is striking. Jacob could not see who he was sleeping with. He did not know he was making a permanent, life-altering decision until the morning. Thus, his dark night of the soul contained a literal dark night of his senses. He was in the dark, and his story began to unravel.

In order to have Rachel as his wife, Jacob agrees to serve Laban for another seven years. He is married to both Leah and Rachel while living under Laban's watchful eye. Unfortunately for Jacob, his hardships would only continue. Rachel was clearly his favorite wife, but she was infertile for a considerable amount of time. During this time period, Leah provided him with his first four children.⁶⁶ A desperate Jacob sought to manage the situation. He was angry with Rachel and inflicted violence upon her servant, Bilhah, sleeping with her and forcing her to conceive two sons on Rachel's behalf.⁶⁷ The jealous Leah, then, decided to get her servant, Zilpah, involved, because she saw that she was done bearing children. Zilpah gave Jacob another

⁶⁵ v. 26.

⁶⁶ Gen 29:32-36.

⁶⁷ Gen 30:3-9.

two sons.⁶⁸ Yet at long last, despite Rachel's history of fertility complications, God granted her a son of her own womb: Joseph.⁶⁹

After Joseph was born, Jacob plots to leave Laban's estate and return to his homeland, Canaan, with his wives, female servants, and children. This task, however, proved to be more complicated than Jacob had anticipated. He and Laban unknowingly began an intricate dance of deceit against one another. On one hand, Laban removes all the speckled and spotted goats from his herd so that Jacob would not receive any of his flock.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Jacob mates the flocks in order to obtain his own animals that were stronger than Laban's.⁷¹ Tensions only continue to grow once Jacob flees with his entire family and all the animals and possessions in his care as if he had something to hide.⁷² Additionally, Rachel takes Laban's household gods and hides them from him.⁷³ Regardless of the continual lies Jacob told to get his way, he justifies his actions based on his interactions with God, for it was God who told Jacob it was time for him to return to his homeland in the first place.⁷⁴

Jacob's sojourn back to Canaan serves as the climax and ending of his dark night of the soul. In Gen 32:3, Jacob is accompanied by angels. The beginning of his dark night of the soul was marked by these messengers from God, and now they are present once more. Thus he "can

⁶⁸ Gen 30:10-15.

⁶⁹ Gen 30:23-25.

⁷⁰ Gen 30:36-37.

⁷¹ Gen 30:43.

⁷² Gen 31:2-31.

⁷³ Gen 31:34-36.

⁷⁴ Gen 31:4.

go on to meet Esau in tandem with the same divine company that he met at Bethel.”⁷⁵ This marked narrative symmetry between the Bethel story and this one⁷⁶ informs the reader that something important is about to happen. Not only are his angelic messengers present, but he also has human messengers which he sends before him with his gifts of cattle, donkeys, and sheep as a peace offering.⁷⁷ Jacob is distraught to learn from his human messengers that Esau is coming to meet him with an entourage of four hundred men.⁷⁸

Jacob’s emotions catch up to him. In Gen 32:8, it is stated that he is both afraid and distressed. His fear is described as ירא (‘*yra*’). This word is also used in Gen 28:17 during Jacob’s first vision of God and the stairway: “And he was ירא (‘*yra*’ - afraid) and said, ‘How awesome (נִרְאָה - *nora*’) is this place! This is none other than the house of God...” Jacob proclaims that the place was נִרְאָה (*nora*’ - awesome), which is the Nifal participle of the same root ירא (‘*yra*’ - afraid). The only two times in Jacob’s storyline that he experiences ירא (‘*yra*’) is during his time at Bethel, and in this moment in Gen 32. So, his fear is closely related to his proximity to God and the beginning and ending of his dark night. Another time ירא (‘*yra*’) is used in the Pentateuch is in Exod 2:15 when Moses feared that his murder of the Egyptian was discovered. His fear resulted in him, too, fleeing and then having a divine encounter with God in the burning bush.

⁷⁵ Walters, “Jacob Narrative,” 604.

⁷⁶ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: a Translation with Commentary*, 1st ed. (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 119.

⁷⁷ Gen 32:5-6.

⁷⁸ Gen 32:7.

On top of his fear, Jacob was צָרַר (*šrar*). The NRSV translates this word as “distressed,” but a further look at the Hebrew and Greek provides a wide Semantic range. The word צָרַר (*tsrar*) can mean being bound up, stressed, agitated, small, cramped, shut up, or confined.⁷⁹ The Greek Septuagint translates the root צָרַר (*šrar*) as ἀπορέω (*aporeo*), which means to be at a loss, without resources, not know what to do, and to be in doubt.⁸⁰ So not only is Jacob experiencing the clearly comprehensible emotion of fear, but the ambiguous emotion of צָרַר (*šrar*) is compounded onto his fear. The interpretation of צָרַר (*šrar*) lies upon the reader. I read צָרַר (*šrar*) as Jacob feeling both physically and metaphorically stuck. Physically, he has the messengers, his family members, his animals, and all his possessions surrounding him. He is fearful about confronting Esau, and because of his fear, he feels utterly stuck on how to lead his family. Jacob is suffering from paralyzing fear, potentially similar to a panic attack.

The separation from his homeland and his past is starting to take a toll on him. The last time he had confronted Esau, it was only him. Now, he has built an entire family. He has many watching eyes on him, looking to him to make the next choice and to provide. He knows he wronged Esau when he was young, and he recognizes that the chances his actions would catch up with him were high. His solution is to pass his gifts ahead of him in hopes of appeasing Esau before he meets him face to face.⁸¹ Despite his paralyzing fear, he chooses to pray to God. There is a distinct change in his posture towards God when he prays in Gen 32:11-14. I recall Jacob’s vow to God in Gen 28:22-24 after his vision at Bethel. Here, he promised to be faithful to God *if*

⁷⁹ *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 385-6.

⁸⁰ Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*, (Eastford: Martino Publishing, 2015), 92.

⁸¹ Gen 32:22.

God remained with him and provided him with protection, bread, and clothing. But, in Gen 32:10-13, Jacob prays again, this time humbly, as he “recognizes God’s loyalty to him; now [his] fidelity replaces his arrogance and lack of trust.”⁸² His dark night of the soul deprives him of his comfort. Yes, God provided him with many possessions, livestock, wives, and children despite his selfish prayer at Bethel. But it all came at a cost. He was tricked time and time again by his father-in-law. He spent over fourteen years away from his homeland, living under a man whom he had to respect, even though he was untrustworthy. Jacob was likely humiliated and defeated. Yet he recognizes how faithful God had been to him.⁸³ He prays for God to protect him, not to destroy Esau.

There is one last comparison to note in the beginning of Jacob night at Bethel and his dark night at the Jabbok. At Bethel, he received a clear word from The Lord in Gen 28:15-17. Yet in Gen 32, there is no recorded word from God in response to Jacob’s prayer. God appears to be completely silent. That is, until Jacob is entirely alone once more after the crowd of messengers and family members go ahead of him, and he is encountered by an unknown man. This is where his dark night of the soul reaches its climax.

⁸² Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Genesis 1-25A*, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2018), 100.

⁸³ Gen 32:11.

CHAPTER 3

GETTING DUSTY WITH THE DIVINE

Beginning, Taking, and Crossing

The story portrayed in Gen 32:23-33 is a threshold experience in Jacob's life. He is in an obvious physical transition as he journeys toward Esau. One could interpret his entire trek to his homeland as a liminal experience, as most journeys are. He is transitioning from one place to the next, and he will not occupy this liminal space forever. Yet I see the Jabbok as a representation of a tangible threshold that he crosses over after his interaction with the unknown man. Paul Valéry says in his *Cahiers* that a threshold can be “characterized as a loss of control [such as] joy, desperation, dejection, [and] consternation... without any meaning except an energetic one.”⁸⁴ Thresholds can emerge before one can make sense of them or identify them.⁸⁵

Gen 32:23-24 set the stage for Jacob's wrestling match with the unknown אִישׁ ('š - man). There are several reasons why I have classified these two verses together as the beginning of the story. First, the verb לקח (*lqh*) is used twice: once in v. 23, and again in v. 24. In v. 23, Jacob took his wives, female servants, and children along on his journey. And in v. 24, he takes them again and sends them over the river.

Another verb that is used in vv. 23-24 is עבר ('*abr* - cross/pass over). In v. 23, this verb refers to Jacob crossing over the ford of Jabbok. English translations describe that Jacob sent

⁸⁴ Alexis Nuselovici, *Between Urban Topographies and Political Spaces: Threshold Experiences*, ed. Mauro Ponzi and Fabio Vighi (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 15.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

over “all his possessions,”⁸⁶ “everything he had,”⁸⁷ and “everything that belonged to him,”⁸⁸ to name a few. Yet both the original Hebrew and the Septuagint translations tend to be more ambiguous. The Hebrew phrase used here is וַיַּעֲבֵר אֶת-אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ (and he passed/sent over what he had). The Septuagint renders this phrase as πάντα τὰ αὐτοῦ (*panta ta autou*), which simply means “all of his.” Jacob passed over all of himself, everything that he had. If readers take this literally, the English translations provide the most detail: he sent over all of his possessions, wives, female servants, and children. But if one looks at the original Hebrew and specifically the Septuagint anagogically, perhaps Jacob sent over more than physical objects and people. In his fear and distress, he sent over his pride and was left alone in full surrender to whatever may happen next. He sent the physical gifts to Esau without knowing what Esau’s response may be.

As Jacob was palpably surrounded by human and angelic messengers, his family, and animals just a few verses earlier, now he is starkly alone. In v. 24, he became utterly exposed and vulnerable. All that he had to his name and all that gave him status was no longer encompassing him. He strove so forcefully to attain all that he had, or πάντα τὰ αὐτοῦ (*panta ta autou* - all of his), but now it is across the ford of Jabbok. The noun translated as “ford” in v. 23 is *ma’avar*, which is “derived from the reiterated verb עבר (*‘abr*).⁸⁹ Of equal importance, עבר (*‘abr*) is repeated again at the story’s conclusion in v. 32. This is when Jacob passes over Penuel, limping because of his injured hip. Thus, this story is bookended by עבר (*‘abr*) actions.

⁸⁶ New International Version (NIV).

⁸⁷ New Revised Standard Version (NRSVUE).

⁸⁸ Common English Bible (CEB).

⁸⁹ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: a Translation with Commentary*, 121.

The עבר (*'abr*) theme is notable in the Hebrew Bible. It is most obviously associated with the tradition of Passover in Exod 12. Although when considering the chronological story, this event takes place after Jacob's life, the authors of Genesis would have already recognized Passover when reflecting on their history. In Exod 12:12, God speaks to Moses and Aaron about God's plans to strike the firstborns in Egypt, using the verb עבר (*'abr*). Moses uses the same form of עבר (*'abr*) when he relays God's instructions to the elders of Israel. In the case of the story of Jacob, when he later passes over the Jabbok in v. 32, he is no longer Jacob, but Israel. His first action as Israel, his new identity, is passing over a threshold. And the nation of Israel's first action as a free people is represented by God passing over their doors marked by the sacrifice of the Passover lamb.

Not only are Jacob's עבר (*'abr*) actions repeated, but these two עבר (*'abr*) instances are painful in essence. I have already mentioned that Jacob's passing over all that gave him status was likely agonizing. Likewise, when Jacob passed over his family and possessions, this was painful for those he was sending away. His family was left without their husband and father, left to walk the unknown, dark road, potentially right in the clutches of their unfamiliar family member who likely wanted to kill them. Even if the situation was not already dangerous, crossing into uncharted territory in the dead of night is frightening in and of itself. Jacob was paving his family's way into his childhood homeland, but Canaan was a place the rest of his family had not been before. And when Jacob passes over עבר (*'abr*) Peniel alone in v. 32, he is limping because of his hip injury. This marks how, once Jacob passes the ford for himself, he is quite literally in agony.

And He Wrestled with the עִשָּׂו ('ש')

There are two characters in this story: Jacob and the עִשָּׂו ('ש - man). The reader is not given much information about this man, but certain descriptions can support identifying him. There is nothing in the text that alludes to Jacob knowing he was going to wrestle the man when he sent his family away. So, it can be assumed that the man is an unexpected visitor. Jacob is left alone, and then the man merely appears and starts wrestling. The man's surprising appearance is another way this threshold experience is distinguished. So far, Jacob cannot draw meaning from the man's presence—no identity, reason, or name.

There is also no written dialogue between Jacob and the man before this occurs. The text gives no reasoning as to why they started struggling with one another. Jacob's distress, fear, and perhaps anger sustained him to wrestle with this stranger for hours on end. The עִשָּׂו ('ש - man), too, likely had strong emotions as well. If the two men had not talked before they fought, it is the reader's responsibility to determine why they started fighting in the first place.

Along with no dialogue before the fight, the reader is given little information on the events of the nighttime wrestling. The first detail is written in v. 26 when the man injured Jacob's hip. One might wonder what was happening in the hours of wrestling before that point. Were they simply slapping each other around in a manner that did not cause serious injury? How did it take an entire night of wrestling before one of them was truly injured? The reader also does not know any details at all about the man's physical state. The man knew he could not prevail against Jacob. Thus, Jacob was likely of equal strength and will the man in the end. Perhaps the man walked away hurt, as well, but there is nothing in the text that reveals that.

I suggest that the wrestling match was more intense emotionally than it was physically. This is not to say that it was not heated physically, but the emotional vehemence is worth noting.

Only two people in heightened distress could have the stamina to stay awake all night fighting. Yet both men, indeed, held restraint with their opponent. Wrestling requires both participants to “recognize the boundaries of acceptable risk, to arrest the possibility of real violence.”⁹⁰ If Jacob was wrestling God, as some interpret this story, God absolutely had the power to kill him immediately. Likewise, even if Jacob was equally matched with a mortal opposer, both men exercised a degree of self-control by wrestling through the night without killing one another. Eventually, the man identified that he could not defeat Jacob. He pleaded for Jacob to let him go.

So, Jacob was left alone, and he wrestled a man until the breaking of dawn. The Hebrew verb used for “wrestle” in this passage is אבק (’*bq*). While this is the only occurrence of אבק (’*bq*) in the Hebrew Bible, the leitmotif of Jacob struggling, or wrestling, is apparent in his entire story. First, he struggled with Esau inside and outside the womb, securing both his birthright and blessing despite being the younger son. Once he left his homeland, he strove to obtain Rachel as his wife by rolling the stone away from the mouth of the well. After his struggle to marry Rachel, he had many conflicts with Laban. Even more so, wrestling is not reserved solely for Jacob in his story. His wives wrestle, פתל (*pathal*) with one another in Gen 30:8 when they go head-to-head in their fertility battles. In this same verse, Jacob receives his second-born, who is named “wrestling,” Naphtali. “Now, in this culmination moment of his life story, the characterizing image of wrestling is made explicit and literal.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Julia Watts Belser, “Improv and the Angel: Disability Dance, Embodied Ethics, and Jewish Biblical Narrative,” in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, no. 3, (2019): 457.

⁹¹ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: a Translation with Commentary*, 121.

R.J. Whitaker notes that אבק ('*bq*) literally means to “get dusty.”⁹² Jacob sent over “all of his,” he is alone, and now he is left to get physically dirty with this nighttime stranger. It is revealed at the story’s conclusion that Jacob had a sacred experience: he got dusty with the Divine. In every way possible, Jacob is put in a humbling position. The narrator does not provide more detail, and that is used to the reader’s advantage when reading this story allegorically. The narrator makes no mention of the dirt and dust that likely gathered during their tussle. The beads of sweat that quickly formed all over Jacob’s body likely caused increasing discomfort, especially once the gathering dust caked and dried on his body. His vision was already compromised since it was nighttime, but even in the moonlight, it would have gotten worse as the night progressed due to the dust. Once the long-awaited dawn finally arrived, Jacob, the prosperous, distressed, crafty man, was completely filthy.

The Breaking of the Dawn

Verses 25-27 provide a compelling image. In v. 25, Jacob was alone with a man, and they wrestled. In v. 26, Jacob could not defeat the man, and he was injured. In v. 27, the sun begins to rise and Jacob tells the man “I will not let you go until you bless me.” One prominent noun to take note of is שָׁחַר (*šakhar* - dawn). The שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) marks the reddish glow that precedes the dawn.⁹³ This evokes an image of not-quite daylight, but perhaps a red sunrise. This time of day only lasts a few minutes. It is the transitory period between night and day. שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) is used both in v. 25 and v. 27. In v. 25, it signifies the amount of time Jacob wrestled with the man. He wrestled all night long—so long, that it was not until the breaking of the day שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) that the

⁹² R.J. Whitaker, *Even the devil quotes scripture: Reading the Bible on its own terms*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023), Introduction.

⁹³ *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)* 4, ed. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, (Brill: Koninklijke, 2000), 1467.

wrestling match concluded. Verse 27 is when the man acknowledges the glowing red light of the dawn breaking, and Jacob responds by demanding a blessing. It is in between this parallel structure in v. 26 that Jacob is injured. The man dislocated Jacob's hip, revealing his extreme power for the first time in the text. The dislocation of a hip normally occurs during high-energy impacts.⁹⁴ The noteworthy event of Jacob's wound and permanent limp is depicted during those few precious moments of reddish light. I read these precious moments as the heart of this story. The night was not fully gone. The day was almost within reach.

The noun שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) appears several other times in the Hebrew Bible concerning violent situations. The first time שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) is used is in Gen 19:15. This was when the Sodomites gathered at Lot's house, trying to break in as Lot was accompanied by the two angels. The angels prevented the Sodomites from breaking in by pulling Lot back and blinding them.⁹⁵ In the book of Judges, שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) is used again when the unnamed Levite pushes his concubine onto the nightly intruders from Gibeah, "raping and abusing her all through the night and until the morning. [And] as the שָׁחַר (*šakhar* - dawn) began to break, they let her go."⁹⁶ It is soon after this that the Levite murders her. Therefore, this theme of violent, red-hour situations in the Hebrew Bible represents a permanent change to those who are involved - the Sodomites were blinded, the unnamed concubine was tragically raped and murdered, and Jacob was left limping.

Not only is שָׁחַר (*šakhar*) used as a noun in the Hebrew Bible that correlates with stories of violence, but שָׁחַר (*Šakhar*) is also a proper name—a deity within the Canaanite mythology in

⁹⁴ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III, (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 310.

⁹⁵ Gen 19:11.

⁹⁶ Judg 19:25.

the ancient Near East.⁹⁷ *Šakhar* is personified, for example, in Ps 110:3, and her offspring is described as the morning dew.⁹⁸ In both Pss 57:9 and 103:8, she is aroused from her sleep. Lastly, in Song of Songs 6:10, she is connected with the sun, moon, and stars. In ancient Near Eastern mythology, *Šakhar*'s twin is *Šalim*, who represents dusk. Both *Šakhar* and *Šalim* are children of the chief god, *El*.⁹⁹ *Šakhar* represents the divinity of the dawn while *Shalim* represents the evening, giving them the name “sons of day.”¹⁰⁰ The presence of *Šakhar*, or Dawn, brings uncertainty. On one hand, *Šakhar*'s presence means that darkness is nearly over, and in Jacob's case, this was a positive thing. But on the other hand, her light brings “the rebel morning star” as depicted in Isa 14:12-13—a star associated with the underworld.¹⁰¹ As we see in this passage, the most common verb associated with *Šakhar* is that she עלה (*'alah*, - rises), indicating that she, perhaps, was indeed connected to the underworld before she arose, bringing forth her light.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Lodewyk Sutton, “The Dawn of Two Dawns: the Mythical, Royal and Temporal Implications of Dawn for Psalms 108 and 110,” in *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 73, no. 3, (2017): 2.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Samuel A. Meier, “Shahar (Deity),” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary: O-Sh*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Heiron, David F. Grad, John David Pleins, and Astrid B. Beck, (Doubleday: Yale University Press, 1992), 1150-1051; The gender of these gods is problematic because while both of their names are masculine, *Šakhar* is primarily known to be female. *Šakhar* as represented in the Hebrew Bible in Ps 110:3 and Song of Songs 6:10 support the claim that *Šakhar* is a woman. For the purposes of this paper, I will gender *Šakhar* as a female. [Lodewyk Sutton, “The Dawn of Two Dawns,” 2.]

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

While my focus is not to read this story solely through the context of other Ancient Near Eastern narratives, the theme and presence of this Dawn figure gives me pause. She represents transition, beauty, change, evil and good—all at once, and only for a few fleeting moments. Emmanuel Levinas describes that the night of wrestling did not represent a defeat for Jacob.¹⁰³ The dawn appeared. Levinas ponders this and considers why the opening prayer of the Jewish prayer book *siddur* appreciates the rooster for distinguishing night from day when other animals have this skill. The rooster is meaningful because it can recognize the dawn a few moments before all the other animals.¹⁰⁴ While other animals know when the sun is up, the rooster can recognize *Šakhar* and loudly announce her presence.

Like a rooster, the unknown man announced the dawn. But why did he acknowledge the dawn? This is another instance where the reader is given little information and must draw an imaginative conclusion. The most obvious assumption is that the man wanted to stop wrestling because the sunrise meant they wrestled the entire night away. It had been too long; it was time to quit. Or, perhaps the man had a certain respect for or even fear of the *שָׁחַר* (*šakhar*). If it was a common belief that she was rising from the underworld, it would make sense that he would not want to be caught in a violent situation at that moment. Neither man was particularly injured before this point, but that could easily change with the *שָׁחַר* (*šakhar*) appearance.

The dawn appeared and created a very real change in their situation. The entire night passed and there was, seemingly, not a lot going on. But her presence for several mere moments proved to be momentous. She physically provided light so that the men could see each other's faces for the first time. For the reader, she marks the first and only written dialogue between the

¹⁰³ Richard Ira Sugarman, *Levinas and the Torah: A Phenomenological Approach*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 62.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

two men. Jacob received an overwhelming amount in her reddish glow: a lifelong limp, a new name, and a blessing. As for the man, he was seen only in Dawn's moments. By the time the sun had fully risen in v. 32, the text does not say that the man is there anymore.

Prevailing, Blessing, and Naming

There is another notable verbal repetition, or a type of call-and-response, found in vv. 26-27 and 29-30. Both vv. 26 and 29 contain the verb יכל (*ykl* - to prevail). Verse 26 begins with the statement that the unknown man saw that he could not prevail over Jacob. This is when Jacob, then, gets injured. Verse 29 contains the man's declaration that Jacob struggled with both God and people and he יכל (*ykl* - prevailed). On the other hand, in v. 27 Jacob states that he would not send his adversary away until/if/when he ברך (*brk* - blessed) him. And in v. 30, Jacob receives his blessing. Thus, when ordered chronologically, the pattern looks like this: First, the unknown man does not prevail, so Jacob demands a blessing. Then, the man agrees that Jacob prevailed rather than him, and so he blesses him. Jacob's persistence and determination to fight for the entire night prove to earn him his long-awaited blessing.

It is in the very middle of this call-and-response in v. 28 and the beginning of v. 29 that Jacob obtains his new name. Verses 29, 31, and 32 include the theme of calling and naming. First, the man asks for Jacob's name in v. 28. Then, the man declares Jacob will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel in v. 29. In v. 31, Jacob named the place Penuel, declaring his life was preserved even after seeing God face to face.

The theme of naming is fascinating when put in conversation with the gods and goddesses *Šakhar*, *Šalim*, and *El*. *Šakhar* rises in vv. 25 and 27, emphasizing both how long Jacob wrestled and focusing the reader's attention on his injury. But now, in vv. 29, 31, and 32, both Jacob and his place of wrestling gain new names. All of these new names contain *El*

language: יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yišera 'el*), פְּנִיֵּאֵל (*peni 'el*), and פְּנוּאֵל (*penu 'el*).¹⁰⁵ To put this in a mystical lens, there is a shift in identity when someone goes through a dark night of the soul. Jacob's new name, along with his injury, marks the end of his dark night of the soul.

Jacob is named יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yišera 'el*), because he had “striven with God and with humans and prevailed.”¹⁰⁶ The Hebrew for “striven” here is שָׂרָה (*sarah*). The translation that Jacob had striven or exerted himself with God is ambiguous. It can be better interpreted that Jacob had striven/strengthened “with beings divine.”¹⁰⁷ The man's declaration is so vague, and when considering the Hebrew word שָׂרָה (*šarah*), one's imagination can settle here. The man's statement that Jacob had striven with people is a bit more obvious. The reader can naturally recall how Jacob struggled with Esau and Laban and obtained exactly what he wanted. But the man was not merely referring to those instances. Jacob's new name ultimately came after the night of wrestling a divine being. He had to exert himself and persevere against an angel, or God, as the ultimate test.

Yet what about strengthening with a divine being (or beings)? Jacob thanked God in prayer for God's faithfulness in Gen 32:10-13, and then asked for rescue from Esau's hand. God's unexpected response to this prayer is this wrestling match with the unknown man. To put it another way, God's response was to, ultimately, conclude Jacob's dark night of the soul.

¹⁰⁵ There are various approaches as to why there is a pronunciation change between פְּנִיֵּאֵל (*Peniel*) and פְּנוּאֵל (*Penuel*). Andrew E. Steinmann suggests that Jacob names the place נִיֵּאֵל (*peni 'el*) in v. 29, but elsewhere the place is called פְּנוּאֵל (*penu 'el*) (see v. 30; Judg 8:8-9, 17; 1 Kings 12:25). In v. 29, “the name is presented in a form that sounds more like ‘face of God’ to make it match more closely Jacob's reason for naming it.” See Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, 311-2.

¹⁰⁶ Gen 32:29.

¹⁰⁷ E. A. Speiser, “The Story of Jacob,” in *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, (New Haven & London: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1974), 254.

Before the brotherly reunion, Jacob had a divine encounter that required his whole self—his total physical, mental, and spiritual effort. Wrestling requires both feet firmly planted on the ground. Jacob brought his whole self to the wrestling match, such as the culmination of his past experiences, his desires, his knowledge, and his emotions.¹⁰⁸ “All of his,” πάντα τὰ αὐτοῦ (*panta ta autou*), was across the Jabbok and he was left to strengthen against a being who understood him better than anyone he had ever encountered before. He wrestled long enough to get dusty. He wrestled diligently enough to prevail against the Divine. He exerted himself against the man, engaging his muscles, breath, and senses to triumph over him. He שָׂרָה (*šarah* - strove) with an effort that was just as much spiritual as it was physical.

Jacob asks for his adversary’s name, but he does not get an answer. Instead, he receives a question, followed by a blessing: “Why do you ask for my name? And he blessed him there.” The lack of clarity Jacob received in return for the name of his adversary drives yet another mystical interpretation of this story. He was not able to name the event he experienced nor the man he wrestled. All he could do was name the place where it occurred. This is how he chooses to make sense of his situation, deeming the place פְּנִיֵּאֵל (*peni’el*), because that is where he saw God face to face. Even though Jacob’s questions were not answered, he was granted two lasting attributes from his encounter: a new name and a new limp.

Healing and Injury

Verse 32 concludes this story: “And the sun arose on him just as he passed over Penuel. And he was limping because of his hip.”¹⁰⁹ This verse contains the participle צִלְעָה (*solea’* - limping). This is the only Hebrew participle in this story, and it depicts that Jacob not only

¹⁰⁸ Whitaker, *Even the devil quotes scripture*, Introduction.

¹⁰⁹ Translation mine.

limped after that one long night—he was limping from that day on. Robert Alter writes about Jacob’s limp in his commentary on the book of Genesis:

Appearing to Jacob in the dark of the night, before the morning when Esau will be reconciled with Jacob, is the embodiment of portentous antagonism in Jacob’s dark night of the soul. [The man] is doubting Esau as an adversary, but he is also doubting of all with whom Jacob has to contend, and he may equally well be an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself. A powerful physical metaphor is intimated by the story of the wrestling: Jacob, whose name can be construed as “he who acts crookedly,” is bent, permanently lamed, by his nameless adversary in order to be made straight before his reunion with Esau.¹¹⁰

Jacob is a changed man, a blessed man, and a new-named man. His limp is his permanent reminder of his spiritual transformation. He leaves Penuel and is reconciled with Esau after his dark night of the soul. For the remainder of the book of Genesis, Jacob takes the form of a minor character, as the story of his sons particularly shines through. His night at Penuel and his reunion with Esau is the conclusion of Jacob’s major story arc. Now, he is Israel, one of the patriarchs of the people of YHWH.

The Hebrew participle שָׁלַל (*šolea’* - limping) indicates that Jacob limped for the rest of his life. Frederick Buechner has called this event “The Magnificent Defeat,” and indeed it was.¹¹¹ The motif of the pairing of optimistic and unfavorable elements in this story is made most obvious here. The man with the new name “is not separate from the new crippling, for the crippling is the substance of the name.”¹¹² Other instances of this motif include the *šakhar* that

¹¹⁰ Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: a Translation with Commentary*, 121-2.

¹¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2010), 270.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

brought both hope and foreboding and the presence of God in the name פְּנִיֵּאל (*peni'el*), the cause for dread and exultation.¹¹³

Jacob named the place Penuel, because this is where he saw God face to face, and his life was delivered. The Hebrew word for life נֶפֶשׁ (*nepheš*) can also mean “soul,” which results in a fascinating translation as one considers this encounter as the end of a dark night of the soul. If Jacob’s limp is thought of as a defeat, the deliverance of Jacob’s soul is the redemptive aspect of this story. Jacob has an external and internal change after his encounter. The external change is his limp, while the internal change is the healing of his soul. This internal dialogue he has of naming the place depicts the inner change he undergoes. He appears grateful that his life was spared and his soul was healed. His “soul healing” occurred at the same moment as his physical injury: the rising of the dawn. While healing and wounds are opposites, here, they come to fruition at the exact same moment.

Jacob crosses over the Jabbok, the threshold. He adapts to walking with his limp for the first time in a body of flowing water. Given his exhaustion and pain, this was likely a slow and taxing process. The presence of water can allude to the larger creation, destruction, and recreation narrative in Gen 1-2 and Gen 6-9. First, in Gen 1:7-8, God separates the water from the sky, and then in Gen 1:10-11, God distinguishes the water and the dry ground. In doing so, God creates order out of chaos.¹¹⁴ Before the separation of the waters, there was only the spirit of God hovering over the waters, and the תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבְהוֹ (*tōhû wābohû* - formless void). After that, the first representation of a river in the Hebrew Bible comes in Gen 2:11-15 when the four branches from

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 3d ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 97.

the river of Eden are described in detail. At the conclusion of the creation narratives in Gen 1-2, bodies of water are given structure. Yet, in Gen 6, God disrupts the structure of the water by sending a flood to cleanse the earth.¹¹⁵ What remains after is God's promise to not destroy the earth by flood again in Gen 9:12. After the flood, the earth was recreated. God's command to Noah to multiply and fill the earth mirrors God's command to Adam.¹¹⁶ Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth populated the world. The earth was transformed by water.

In the same way, water is yet another symbol of Jacob's transformation. Jacob's first action after his internal and external transformation is to get wet. In this process, he is also cleaned of his filth from the night. Once his feet touch the dry ground again, he emerges from his dark night with the sun shining on him, cleaner than he was before, and revived. His soul, which persevered through its dark night which lasted over a decade, was healed at last. It was time for him to reunite with his family and, finally, reconcile with his twin.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.; The original authors of Genesis would have also been familiar with other ancient Near Eastern flood narratives of Atrahasis and in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

¹¹⁶ Gen 9:1-4; Gen 1:28.

CHAPTER 4

INTERWEAVING ST. JOHN, JACOB, AND DISABILITY STUDIES

I have discovered that St. John's writings and Jacob's story are intricately interwoven through the hermeneutic of Christian mysticism. This final chapter will engage key moments in Jacob's life with St. John's works *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, and his poem "Living Flame of Love." These parallels will demonstrate how both St. John's mention of wounds and Jacob's limp determine precisely *how* Jacob acquired his blessing. I will utilize both queer and disability readings of this text to conclude that Jacob's wound ultimately healed his soul.

The Phases of Purgation in the Jacob Narrative

John suggests there are seven phases in the purgative process during a dark night of the soul: preparation for transformation, exterior purgation, termination of suffering, enkindling with love, interior purification, consciousness of nothingness, and recurrence and return.¹¹⁷ St. John creates a subtle distinction between "purgation" and "purification." In describing the first four phases, he uses the words "purge" and "purgation" to illustrate what the soul goes through as it prepares for change.¹¹⁸ Then, in the final three phases, he uses the word "purification" instead of "purgation."¹¹⁹ This is because purgation "is the lot of beginners... [while] purification takes place in those who are already proficient, at the

¹¹⁷ Susan Muto, *John of the Cross for Today: The Dark Night*, (Ave Maria Press: Notre Dame, 1994), 208-210; Muto uses the words "purgation" and "purification" interchangeably in her book. She writes that the second phase is "exterior *purification*" and the fifth phase is "interior *purgation*." In order to use vocabulary consistent with what St. John of the Cross uses, I have altered the names for phases two and five.

¹¹⁸ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross: Revised Edition*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (ICS Publications: Washington, D.C., 1991), 417-8; A slight exception to this statement is the fourth phase. Here, he uses both adjectives: "the soul is purged and purified by this fire of love."

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

time God desires to lead them into the state of divine union.”¹²⁰ I will hold these seven phases in tandem with Jacob’s story as told in Gen 27-32. Six of the seven phases manifest themselves with a mystical reading of the Jacob cycle.

Table 1: Phases of Purgation in the Jacob Narrative

Phase Number	Description	Scripture References
1	preparation for transformation	Gen 27:28-30; 28:2
2	exterior purgation	Gen 28:42; 28:17-23
3	termination of suffering	Gen 29-31
4	enkindling with love	—
5	interior purification	Gen 32:2-22
6	consciousness of nothingness	Gen 32:23-33
7	recurrence and return	Gen 32:33; Eze 20:4; Isa 2:6; Jer 2:5

The first phase of preparation for transformation is the beginning of spiritual deepening when “the Mystery, like fire, [prepares one], as does the wood, to be radically altered.”¹²¹ St. John states that in this first phase, the soul is both “purge[d] and prepare[d].”¹²² Jacob’s preparation for transformation occurred with both an accidental and intentional blessing from his father. In Gen 27:28-30, Isaac blesses Jacob while assuming he was Esau. Even though Isaac unthinkingly blessed the wrong son, it was an irreversible act. Yet in Gen 28:2, Isaac blesses Jacob deliberately, wishing to him that he receives “the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 119.

¹²¹ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 208.

¹²² Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 417.

blessing of Abraham, to [him] and [his] offspring with [him].”¹²³ These moments of blessing distinguish both the theme of Jacob chasing after blessings and the journey he will physically and spiritually embark upon as he leaves his homeland.

The second phase, called “exterior purgation,” is the beginning of suffering in a dark night of the soul. “The source of the suffering is not the Mystery... but [one’s] own weakness and imperfections.”¹²⁴ Jacob was blessed, but the nature of his blessing had consequences. Esau was enraged, vowing that he would kill Jacob once Isaac died.¹²⁵ The source of Jacob’s suffering in Gen 27 is a result of Rebekah’s plan to usurp Isaac and Esau, along with Jacob’s willingness to carry the plan through. It was Rebekah’s idea to get Isaac’s livestock because she overheard Isaac’s conversation with Esau.¹²⁶ She cared so much that Jacob received Esau’s blessing that she was willing to risk taking Jacob’s curse from Isaac if their plan did not work.¹²⁷ Rebekah both prepared the food and clothed Jacob with Esau’s best garments.¹²⁸ While Jacob did the heavy lifting of finding the meal and, ultimately, lying to Isaac about his identity, Rebekah initiated the deceit. Perhaps Jacob would have calculated this plan on his own if he was the one who overheard Isaac and Esau’s private conversation. Nevertheless, the plan was successful because Rebekah was crafty and Jacob was willing.

¹²³ NRSV.

¹²⁴ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 208.

¹²⁵ Gen 27:41.

¹²⁶ Gen 27:5-10.

¹²⁷ Gen 27:13.

¹²⁸ Gen 27:14-16.

Rebekah and Jacob were the “family underdogs [who] capsize[d] the traditional power structure, namely the link between patriarch and firstborn.”¹²⁹ Despite this calculated shift in power, the text does not indicate that her and Jacob’s actions were sinful. There was no divine rebuke; rather, “one might easily surmise that [Rebekah and Jacob act] with God’s sanction.”¹³⁰ Yet the result of their actions was Esau’s fury and Jacob’s order to leave. St. John paraphrases Wis 7:11 when he explains the phase of exterior purgation, saying, “All good things come to the soul together with [wisdom].”¹³¹ As soon as Jacob was sent away, God appeared in a dream and reminded Jacob of the promise he made to his grandfather Abraham. God was still working for Jacob’s benefit even though he was experiencing the second phase of purgation through exile from his home.

Jacob declares a notable response to God’s vision in Gen 28. His words upon waking are: “‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it! And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’”¹³² He then names the place Bethel and vows to God that he would let God be his God if he is taken care of with food, clothing, and protection.¹³³ Jacob’s devotion to God was conditional. Even though he received a birthright, blessing, and promise of prosperity in his divine vision, he still demanded more from God. According to St. John’s seven marks of purgation, Jacob was not yet united with God. His soul was still

¹²⁹ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1993), 75.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹³¹ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 417.

¹³² Gen 28:17-18.

¹³³ Gen 28:19-23.

in the purgation process and not the purification process. Jacob's journey to becoming Israel would need to continue.

The third phase of purgation is a brief termination of suffering. Once Jacob endured the external purgation of Canaan, he was granted reprieve. St. John illustrates a fire during this process, saying:

The fire, when applied, would be powerless over them if they did not have imperfections from which to suffer. These imperfections are the fuel that catches on fire, and once they are gone there is nothing left to burn. So it is here on earth; when the imperfections are gone, the soul's suffering terminates, and joy remains.¹³⁴

Jacob found his uncle, Laban. When Laban met Jacob, he instantly embraced him and welcomed him into his home, announcing, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!"¹³⁵ Jacob found his new family and, after seven years of service, was married to Leah and Rachel. Although seven years of service should have been gruesome, the text indicates that lovestruck Jacob did not mind, for the years "seemed to him but a few days because of his love for [Rachel]."¹³⁶

The fifth phase is interior purification, the beginning of the purification process. According to St. John, Jacob is no longer a beginner. In the fifth phase, he is now getting prepared for the purification of his soul. This is more "obscure, dark, and dreadful,"¹³⁷ but the last three phases are critical in Jacob encountering divine union with God. This is a "new onslaught of intense purification... [when] the fire of love returns to consume what must be purified from within... One's suffering becomes intimate and spiritual."¹³⁸ Susan Muto describes this spiritual suffering as one "being led to a place [one] does not

¹³⁴ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 417.

¹³⁵ Gen 29:16.

¹³⁶ Gen 29:22.

¹³⁷ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 119.

¹³⁸ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 209.

want to go.”¹³⁹ In Gen 32, Jacob finds himself going back to Esau. He did not want to do this, but he knew that he must. It was time. Jacob’s prayer of submission and distress during his journey home is monumentally different from his prayer in Gen 28. He acknowledges, first, that he is unworthy of God’s love and faithfulness. Then, he pleads to God for deliverance from Esau’s hand. He concludes his prayer by recalling God’s original promises from his Bethel vision many years ago.¹⁴⁰ In this prayer, there are no “if” statements. Jacob does not attempt to bargain with God the way he did in his youth or with his father. This prayer is uttered by a man with a stark awareness of his mortality. Jacob understood his humble position before God.

The fifth phase unravels further with the sixth phase of consciousness of nothingness, which is the story of him wrestling in Gen 32:23-33. “At this time [the soul] is conscious of nothing but its own bitterness... [yet] the soul’s joy will be more interior because of the more intimate purification.”¹⁴¹ First, the soul is aware of its bitterness. Muto states that the “journey to this high place requires nothing less than a lifetime of experience.”¹⁴² Jacob certainly had a lifetime’s worth of experiences once he reached the Jabbok. Jacob was dusty. Jacob sent everything away. He was aware of his own bitterness and nothingness. He became nothing when he allowed himself to be alone. He had nothing and nobody to rely on but his own faculties when he wrestled with the man. And then he became injured, officially making him emotionally, spiritually, and physically depleted. All he could do after that was hold on and, one last time, demand a blessing. He was used to demanding blessings, but this time it was different.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 209.

¹⁴⁰ Gen 32:10-14.

¹⁴¹ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 418.

¹⁴² Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 210.

The שָׁחַר (*šakhar* - dawn) was, literally, rising at the climax of his dark night of the soul. He knew that he was on holy ground, just as he knew at Bethel. Once Jacob became Israel, he maintained his habit of naming the place he encountered God anew: “So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’”¹⁴³ These words echo his statement from his first nighttime encounter with God in Gen 28: “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!”¹⁴⁴

Along with the soul acknowledging its bitterness in the sixth phase, the soul’s joy becomes “more interior because of the more intimate purification.”¹⁴⁵ Kevin P. Sullivan describes Jacob’s interaction with the man as a night of “very intimate contact with a divine being.”¹⁴⁶ Rashi interprets this encounter as two men becoming bound, “struggling to topple each other... [with] one hug[ging] and t[ying] up the other with his arms.”¹⁴⁷ Julia Watts Belser notes that Genesis 32 “read through Rashi’s eyes... imagines an embrace between man and angel in which both bodies navigate the thin space between intimacy and risk.”¹⁴⁸ This unveils the possibility that Jacob’s encounter with the unnamed man was homoerotic, or one of “same-sex passion.”¹⁴⁹ The distinct intimacy of this purification can provide both queer and disability readings of this text. Since a Christian audience commonly identifies Jacob’s

¹⁴³ Gen 32:33.

¹⁴⁴ Gen 28:18.

¹⁴⁵ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 418.

¹⁴⁶ Kevin P. Sullivan, *Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament*, (Boston: Brill, 2004), 54.

¹⁴⁷ Yisrael Rashi and Isser Zvi Herczeg, *Perush Rashi al ha-Torah* = *Rashi: the Torah with Rashi’s commentary*, 1st ed., (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1999), 370.

¹⁴⁸ Julia Watts Belser, “Improv and the Angel: Disability Dance, Embodied Ethics, and Jewish Biblical Narrative,” in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, no. 3 (2019): 452.

¹⁴⁹ Chris L. De Wet, “John Chrysostom on Homoeroticism,” in *Neotestamentica* 48 (2014): 188.

visitor as a divine being, this can “indicate that the homoerotic is a valid ground for divine manifestation. The deity appeared as a ‘man’ and spoke to Jacob in a highly charged night of erotic brotherhood.”¹⁵⁰ Yet even if the nature of Jacob and the man’s wrestling was not sexual, a “queering” of the biblical text stands against what might be considered “normal and natural... both subvert[ing] and pervert[ing]” it.¹⁵¹ A queering of this story does not directly assume that Jacob was queer in the ways postmodern society understands queerness. Rather, the queering of scripture invites all people to engage in the Bible from an affirming stance and to be received with love rather than shame.

Along with a queer reading of the text, reading the text through disability theory further affirms the experiences of all people. Belser continues her exposition of Jacob’s disability, saying:

I prefer to imagine that Jacob attains wholeness not by ameliorating impairment but by incorporating it into his sense of self. Jacob arrives whole in Shechem not because he strives in unaffected by his encounters of the road, but because he has integrated disability into his identity, because he has allowed himself to be changed by the angel's touch.¹⁵²

Neither Jacob’s limp nor his potentially homoerotic encounter rendered him unable to reconcile with Esau, receive a blessing, or become Israel. Instead, he lived on with his limp, which he acquired through intimate contact with another man.

The seventh and final phase is recurrence and return. This phase acknowledges that one’s growth and arrival at intimacy with God is not linear. St. John illustrates there are periods after the dark night of the soul when “the purification is threatening to assail the soul again... [and then] the purification soon

¹⁵⁰ Michael Carden, “Genesis,” in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, 2d ed., ed. by Deryn Guest, (La Vergne: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2022), 55.

¹⁵¹ Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 18.

¹⁵² Belser, “Improv and the Angel,” 458.

returns.”¹⁵³ When this happens, one might be convinced that all joy is lost and the “blessings are over.”¹⁵⁴ Although Jacob becomes a side character after Gen 32, God’s people established themselves as the Israelites after Jacob’s dark night of the soul. They were the children of the house of Jacob.¹⁵⁵ His exile from and eventual return to Canaan personifies the Israelites’ exile in Babylon.¹⁵⁶ As well as that, a dietary law is set in place after Jacob’s wrestling. Gen 32:33 states that “the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because [the man] struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.” This law memorializes Jacob’s limp. The recurrence and return of Jacob’s dark night of the soul, his legacy, is ultimately manifested in the Israelite community in their dietary practices, their sufferings, and their identity.

A Delightful Wound

Jacob’s wound proves significant within the Israelite community, and the image of a sacred wound is also interwoven in St. John’s writings. His poem “Living Flame of Love” describes a “delightful wound” inflicted upon someone by a Divine being. St. John describes this living flame of love as appearing first in the *Dark Night*. It is alluded to in the third stanza of the poem: “On that glad night... [I did not] look at anything, with no other light or guide than the one that burned in my heart.”¹⁵⁷ Thus he describes the flame as painless, comforting, and conforming to God: the love of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁸ The first two stanzas of “Living Flame of Love” are written as so:

¹⁵³ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 418.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁵⁵ Eze 20:6; Isa 2:56 Jer 2:5.

¹⁵⁶ Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Genesis 25B-50*, 105.

¹⁵⁷ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 359.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 633.

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! if it be
your will:
tear through the veil of this
sweet encounter!

O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate
touch
that tastes of eternal life
and pays every debt!
In killing you changed death
to life.¹⁵⁹

St. John's commentary on "Living Flame of Love" provides both clarity on this flame of love and the "delightful wound." It also contains valuable insights into Jacob's mindset about his injury. The poem starts with the lines "O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul..." The flame causes the wound. Yet this flame should not be mistaken for an earthly flame. It is a flame of divine life, wounding "the soul with the tenderness of God's life."¹⁶⁰ And just as the flame of love should not be mistaken for an earthly flame, so the wound should not be mistaken for a mere earthly wound. The next line reveals that the wound is in the "soul in its deepest center." St. John classified the soul's deepest center as God.¹⁶¹ Even though the dark night of the soul and the consequential wound results in distress and pain, they are essential steps for the person experiencing it to be in touch with their deepest center, their God. Without the love of God, one has no existence, and "God is more intimately united with us that we are

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 639-640.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 643.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 645.

with ourselves.”¹⁶² The next line states “Since now you are not oppressive...” This means that the night is over, and the person is no longer afflicted and distressed.¹⁶³ During his fifth phase of interior purification in Gen 32:6, Jacob found himself woefully distressed and fearful about his encounter with Esau. Yet once the dawn rose after his dark night, after his sacred wound, he was no longer distressed—even though he stayed up all night, even though he was limping.

The second stanza begins by illustrating a *cauterio suave*, a “sweet cauterium.” In his commentary, St. John reveals that this cauterium is the Holy Spirit. It is a simile of the living flame of love addressed at the beginning of the first stanza. He goes on to say that “since in a cauterium the fire... produces a more singular effect than it does in other combustibles, the soul calls the act of this union a cauterium in comparison with other acts of union, for it is the outcome of a fire so much more aflame than other fires.”¹⁶⁴ Likewise, Jacob’s wound was caused by a cauterium. It was a particular kind of injury from the Divine. Although he was wounded, he could still walk with a limp. This limp served as a reminder of what he had been through. His soul was healed. Perhaps he viewed his limp, his reminder of what he had been through, as a blessing in itself. A soul that has experienced the intense distress, loneliness, and confusion of a dark night emerges from the night enlightened at the gift of their wound.

This is shown further as the stanza continues: “O sweet cauterium, O delightful wound!” Since the cauterium is a living flame of love, the consequential wound is also sweet.¹⁶⁵ St. John elaborates in his commentary about how the wound caused by the cauterium cannot be cured by medicine.¹⁶⁶ Regardless,

¹⁶² Hein Blommestijn, Jos Huls, and Kees Waaijman, *The Footprints of Love: John of the Cross as guide in the wilderness*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 19.

¹⁶³ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 648.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 658.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 659.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 660.

the wound does not need to be cured—the wound *is* the cure, the mark of the conclusion of St. John’s dark night. He then breaks off from his explanation with a moment of praise to God for inflicting the sacred wound: “O happy wound, wrought by one who knows only how to heal! . . . You are great, O delightful wound, because he who caused you is great!”¹⁶⁷ The third line of the second stanza reveals that a gentle hand inflicted the wound. St. John’s praise for the gentle hand that inflicted his wound carries a similar tone to Jacob’s proclamation in Gen 32:32: “For I have seen God face-to-face, yet my life is preserved.” The surprising contradiction of being grateful for an injury is prevalent in both St. John and Jacob. Both are in pain, both are grateful, both have struggled, and both have had divine encounters. All at the same time.

Disability in the Jacob Story

As a result of the ways Jacob’s experiences are interwoven in St. John’s writings, I have found that both his wound and his wrestling can be read through the hermeneutic of disability theory. Disability can be defined as “a cultural construction that entails political, religious, sexual, and legal aspects and is dependent upon the particular social and cultural context in which human differences are located.”¹⁶⁸ A disability, particularly in an ancient context did not need an official diagnosis. For “if a physical, mental, or emotional condition significantly impairs a person’s daily life, that condition is disabling.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, ed. Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. (Mikeal Carl) Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), 29.

¹⁶⁹ Rebecca Raphael, “Things Too Wonderful: A Disabled Reading of Job,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31, no. 4 (2004): 401.

To continue this chapter's theme of how Jacob's life events and his wound interweave with St. John's writings, disability is interwoven in the entire Jacob narrative, even before the disability he acquires in Gen 32. In terms of Jacob's immediate family, Jacob's mother, Rebekah, struggled with infertility before he was born.¹⁷⁰ Even though contemporary readers might not consider infertility as a disability, it was a disability in the ancient Israelite context.¹⁷¹ Struggles to conceive, indeed, emotionally, physically, socially, and spiritually affect women. The grief that is caused can consume daily life. This is apparent in postmodern culture just as much as it was apparent for the wives of the patriarchs. Once Jacob was married to Leah and Rachel, both women had periods of infertility. Rachel struggled with primary infertility because there was a significant amount of time she had to endure before conceiving Joseph.¹⁷² On the other hand, Leah's womb was opened soon after she was married to Jacob.¹⁷³ Yet later in life, Leah experienced secondary infertility, which marks a period in which a woman struggles to conceive, even after having at least one child.¹⁷⁴

Jacob's family encountered other disabilities, as well. Isaac is depicted as nearly blind at the end of his life.¹⁷⁵ His loss of sight proved to be significant enough to completely alter the trajectory of his sons' stories, as this was how Jacob obtained Esau's blessing. Jacob, too, experienced some loss of eyesight at the end of his life.¹⁷⁶ As well as that, Esau displays traits characteristic of attention deficit

¹⁷⁰ Gen 25:22.

¹⁷¹ *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, 29.

¹⁷² Gen 30:2, 23.

¹⁷³ Gen 29:32.

¹⁷⁴ Gen 30:10.

¹⁷⁵ Gen 27:2.

¹⁷⁶ Gen 48:11.

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).¹⁷⁷ This reading is less explicit than some physical limitations other characters exhibited. Ora Horn Prouser uses the traditional Jewish methodology of *peshat* to look at the connections between the Bible and special education.¹⁷⁸ Through her practice, she observes Esau’s “need for immediate gratification, explicit directions, lack of cognizance of social mores, and forgetfulness about the stolen blessing when going to meet Jacob”¹⁷⁹ and suggests these attributes as consistent with ADHD. She encourages her readers to engage in a deeper discussion of the ways that “each person’s coping with their vulnerabilities or limitations helped shape the character, spirit, and qualities of faithfulness that led others to revere them as the chosen servants of God.”¹⁸⁰

Jacob’s limp, or disability, “is accompanied by a blessing.”¹⁸¹ He was not blessed despite his disability—he was blessed along with his disability. Jacob’s soul required healing at the end of his dark night, so it is not a mere coincidence that his physical being was affected as well. Jacob witnessed the phases of purgation and, eventually, purification. He achieved intimacy with God as the dawn broke after his long, dark night—not only his tangible dark night with the angel but his ultimate dark night of the soul he journeyed through since the moment he took Esau’s blessing. St. John expressed that God’s ultimate goal for one who goes through a dark night of the soul is their divine union with God.¹⁸² Jacob

¹⁷⁷ Bill Gaventa, “Between Text and Sermon Genesis 32: 22-32,” *Interpretation*, 73, no. 4, (2019): 387.

¹⁷⁸ Ora Horn Prouser, *Esau’s Blessing: How the Bible embraces those with Special Needs*, (Teaneck: Ben Yehuda Press, 2011), xii.

¹⁷⁹ Bill Gaventa, “A Review of ‘Esau’s Blessing: How the Bible Embraces Those with Special Needs’: Ora Horn Prouser,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, (2013): 441.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 442.

¹⁸¹ Judith Z. Abrams, *Judaism and Disability: Portrayals in Ancient Texts from the Tanach through the Bavli*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 85.

¹⁸² Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 119.

attained his divine union with God by first enduring the very tactile union of a physical wrestle. The blessing would not have occurred without Jacob's sustained close contact with the unnamed man. And while Jacob's wound could be depicted as a wound that healed his soul, it also marked the beginning of his new identity which was "won fairly instead of stolen."¹⁸³ Although his blessings from Isaac were legitimate in Gen 27-28, his final blessing provided him both union with God and a peaceful resolution for him and his twin's story.

¹⁸³ Abrams, *Judaism and Disability*, 85.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT CAN THIS MEAN FOR THE EX-VANGELICAL?

In this paper, I have drawn a connection between Jacob's experience wrestling at the Jabbok in Gen 32 and St. John's understanding of a dark night of the soul. In Chapter 1, I presented my thesis question: "In what ways does Jacob's experience at the Jabbok in Gen 32 demonstrate a dark night of the soul?" I also outlined my methodology of both reception history and reader response criticism to examine this text from a mystical context. In Chapter 2, I examined how a reception history of the Christian mystical tradition can read the Jacob narratives in a way that sets the stage for a dark night of the soul. In Chapter 3, I used a literary and rhetorical reading of Gen 32 to open up possibilities for a mystical interpretation of the story. Chapter 4, then, highlighted how St. John's writings and Jacob's story are interwoven through Christian mysticism. Additionally, I engaged queer and disability studies to make meaning of Jacob's wound which healed his soul. This final chapter will conclude this conversation by considering the implication of how this story can be beneficial to those leaving Christian evangelicalism.

Implications of the Study

I began this project motivated by my drive to discover why I felt so enamored by Jacob's story. I could not place my finger on it, but I knew this beautiful piece of Scripture could provide comfort to postmodern readers who have their own struggles with God and Christianity. As I exegeted Gen 32:23-33, I could finally place words to my pull towards this text: the ambiguity of Jacob's story can be valuable for contemporary readers who have considered leaving or have left Christian evangelicalism. Lessons learned both from Christian mysticism and Jacob's journey can help those experiencing shifts in their faith identities.

David Bebbington suggests four categories encompass evangelicalism: “conversionism (an emphasis on the “new birth” as a life-changing religious experience), biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith), and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ’s redeeming work on the cross).”¹⁸⁴ These categories, then, are solidified through repetitive practice. The result is the evangelical identity. Philip Salim Francis uses Judith Butler’s definition of “gender” to define identity as “a sense of self that congeals over time through performance of a series of socially prescribed bodily practices that transpire within the framework of a particular social unit with its unique codes and compulsions.”¹⁸⁵ Consequently, Christians who begin to question the four categories of evangelicalism most likely find themselves in a profound identity crisis.

Indeed, evangelicalism is an identity, along with the evangelical goal of “being absolutely certain” on matters of God, faith, and the biblical text.¹⁸⁶ The drive for certainty creates an evangelical culture of, ironically, rejecting intellectualism and scientific and psychological discoveries.¹⁸⁷ This leads nicely into mysticism and reading the Bible through the esoteric side of religion, or the sacred imagination. There is a level of unknowing about God’s character and matters of the universe that post-evangelicals must reconcile with.

One of the most prominent gifts evangelicalism has given to Christianity is a culture of encouraging Christians to read the Bible for themselves. Yet, over time, evangelicalism’s stress

¹⁸⁴ Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 12.

¹⁸⁵ Philip Salim Francis, “Leaving Evangelicalism,” in *Handbook of Leaving Religion*, ed. Daniel Enstedt, (Boston: Brill, 2019), 164.; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 45.

¹⁸⁶ Francis, “Leaving Evangelicalism,” 168.

¹⁸⁷ Gushee, *After Evangelicalism*, 2.

on biblical devotion and activism and its neglect of intellectualism and sacred tradition have caused many people to reconsider their faith. The strong emphasis on an individualistic interpretation of the Bible results in a faith culture of people who, unfortunately, lean onto their extreme biases to justify actions that do not reflect God’s character. Brian D. McLaren calls this “confirmation bias,” or the suppression of inconvenient truths.¹⁸⁸ The more a Christian reads the Scriptures without considering the communal aspect of scriptural interpretation—embracing the vast and exquisite diversity of worldviews—the more restricted their focus becomes. God, in the believer’s mind, becomes smaller. And God starts to look an awful lot like the believer.

Evangelicalism as both a movement and a concept is very fluid. Those considering leaving evangelicalism, first, must consider *what* they are leaving in the first place. If they choose to keep some pieces of Christianity and throw away others, they must first determine what about their walk with God and church experience has been unsatisfactory. Is it the conviction of “biblical inerrancy, evolution, or overall closed-mindedness” that a portion of evangelicals believe?¹⁸⁹ Is it evangelicalism’s resistance to LGBTQIA+ inclusion, or its foundational roots in racism and patriarchy?¹⁹⁰ Is it how being an evangelical Christian most likely also requires one to affiliate with the Republican political party, resulting in an extremely blurred boundary between church and state?¹⁹¹ The longer an evangelical has adopted a specific

¹⁸⁸ Brian D. McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?: A Guide for the Doubters, Disappointed, and the Disillusioned*, (New York: St. Martin’s Essentials, 2022), 67.

¹⁸⁹ Gushee, *After Evangelicalism*, 8.

¹⁹⁰ Isaac B. Sharp, *The Other Evangelicals: A Story of Liberal, Black, Progressive, Feminist, and Gay Christians—and the Movement That Pushed Them Out*, (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2023), 250.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

mindset, the harder it is for them to distinguish the evangelical version of Christianity from God's actual character.

Statistics on Religious Affiliation in the United States

Generations of adults are becoming increasingly agnostic, atheist, or generally unaffiliated to any religion over time. Church membership in the United States is at an all-time low across the board. In the year 2000, 70% of Americans claimed to be members of a church, synagogue or mosque.¹⁹² In 2010, the number dropped to 61%, and in 2020, the number was at 43%.¹⁹³ In terms of age demographics, in 2022, Generation Z¹⁹⁴ was confirmed as the least religious generation yet; more than one-third, or 34%, consider themselves religiously unaffiliated.¹⁹⁵ The second most religiously unaffiliated generation is Millennials¹⁹⁶ at 29%.¹⁹⁷ The reality is that this next generation of adults is rapidly leaving evangelical Christianity, whether it be their “churches, families, friends... evangelical theology, subculture, God, Jesus, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, Christianity, [or] the whole thing. All of it.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” *Gallup*, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx> (accessed February 25, 2024).

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Americans who were born between 1997 and 2013.

¹⁹⁵ Daniel A. Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America,” *American Survey Center*, March 24, 2022, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/#_edn7 (accessed February 12, 2024).

¹⁹⁶ Americans who were born between 1981 and 1996.

¹⁹⁷ Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America,” 2022.

¹⁹⁸ Gushee, *After Evangelicalism*, 2.

Along with this, the rise of Christian Nationalism, or the “belief that America is God’s chosen nation and must be defended as such,”¹⁹⁹ severely blurs the line between church and state. This leaves those who understand the stark difference between Christian Nationalism and the Gospel of Jesus disoriented. “Political conservatives, Republicans, married adults, college graduates... [and] Southern residents and non-Hispanic Black adults” have statistically been most likely to remain in congregations.²⁰⁰ In the same way, political independents, Eastern residents, and Democrats are more likely to leave.²⁰¹ White evangelical Protestants maintain ideals that are arguably opposite of the heart of Jesus, such as “patriarchal authority, gender difference, [a] White racial identity... preemptive war, torture, the death penalty... opposition to gay rights, [and] support of gun control,”²⁰² to name a few. Those who become dissatisfied with this version of Christianity either decide to push against these popular, violent biblical interpretations or leave Christianity altogether. If the former group chooses to resist while still maintaining their faith community and engaging the Bible, they will be faced with a wrestling match with God similar to Jacob’s.

Phases of Purgation for the Ex-vangelical

In Chapter 4, I outlined St. John’s seven phases of the purgative process in a dark night of the soul: preparation for transformation, exterior purgation, termination of suffering, enkindling

¹⁹⁹ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured Nation*, (New York: Liveright, 2020), 4.

²⁰⁰ Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” 2021.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 3-7.

with love, interior purification, consciousness of nothingness, and recurrence and return.²⁰³ Now, I will turn my attention to what these seven phases may look like for someone who desires to maintain their faith in God while simultaneously choosing to leave evangelicalism. This kind of person can also be known as an “ex-vangelical.”²⁰⁴

First, the preparation for transformation can occur for the ex-vangelical with the emergence of questions, concerns, or a general intuition that something about their faith practices should be changed. Their questions may be: “Is God even real? Did Jesus actually perform miracles and rise from the dead? Is what I have lived for my whole life been a lie?” For those who still have some faith in God or a Higher Power, perhaps the questions are instead: “Does God love me, or is God just disappointed in me? What aspects of my relationship with God, evangelical church experience, and relationship with the Bible have been unsatisfactory? What concepts have I been taught about God and the Bible that do not align with the Christian ethical norms of love, justice, and sacredness or life?”²⁰⁵ Do I want to identify myself as a Christian, or will my renewed relationship with a Higher Power and faith community have a different form?”

The second phase of exterior purgation occurs when these questions unravel to the point that the ex-vangelical cannot sense God’s presence anymore. Life was simpler before the beginning of their dark night of the soul. During that time, evangelicalism’s definitive answers

²⁰³ Susan Muto, *John of the Cross for Today: The Dark Night*, 208-210.

²⁰⁴ I have determined these phases of purgation based on both what I have been through in my dark night of the soul and what I have witnessed my peers go through as they have left evangelical Christianity. The ex-vangelical might experience all seven phases or just a handful of them. These phases are also not completely linear and they may occur in a different order than what I have outlined. Lastly, the phases are extremely distinctive to the individual undergoing them. My goal is to simply summarize the phases and what may occur.

²⁰⁵ David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2d ed., (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), Kindle edition, 2.

on matters of God's character, salvation, and how the world works were sufficient. But now, the spiritual disciplines of scripture reading and prayer which were "once so delightful, are strangely distasteful."²⁰⁶ The purpose of this phase is also for the ex-vangelical to rid themselves of their sins and bad habits that brought them to the dark night in the first place.²⁰⁷

The third phase is the brief termination of suffering. St. John uses the analogy of a burning fire. First, the fire catches onto the soul's imperfections in phase two. But in phase three, there is a termination of suffering because the fire has burned all the imperfections, and there is nothing left.²⁰⁸ In this phase, agony for the ex-vangelical is replaced with numbness, along with feeling liberated from the imperfections that were burned in phase two. For example, perhaps before their dark night of the soul, the ex-vangelical was unaware of their deep-rooted prejudices towards people of a different race or sexual orientation as them. They might have realized that sin and watched it burn in the fire of phase two. Then, they were freed of their sin in phase three. This is a move in the right direction, but unfortunately, they are still dissatisfied with spiritual disciplines. They may still pray, but they do not feel God's presence in return.

The fourth phase, enkindling with love, is when the ex-vangelical experiences the most joy in their dark night. Here, they can step back, reflect, and acknowledge their growth. St. John states that during this time, "the soul is able to perceive the good it was unaware of while the work was proceeding."²⁰⁹ They recognize that, though they have not achieved divine union with God, God is still guiding them through their journey. Here, they might find relief and peace.

²⁰⁶ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 89.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁰⁸ Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, 417.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

The fifth phase of interior purification is similar to the second phase of exterior purgation, except that it is considerably more “intimate (‘only God can know this about me’); subtle (‘I cannot hide this side of my stubborn resistance any longer’); and spiritual (‘I am being led to a place I do not want to go’).”²¹⁰ A paradox occurs in which the ex-vangelical knows they love fiercely love God, “yet they are unable to feel that God loves them [back].”²¹¹ St. John states that it is impossible to fully describe the anguish of this phase.²¹² This might be the point that the ex-vangelical, now purged of their imperfections, deduces or confronts realizations about their identity, sexuality, mental health, or past trauma. They might believe that God and others detest them.²¹³ Since they sense that this is God’s posture towards them, they cannot perceive God’s loving presence. The emptiness of their spiritual disciplines remains.

The sixth phase is the soul’s consciousness of nothingness. Here, the ex-vangelical is convinced that “all blessings are pas[sed].”²¹⁴ They are aware of their humility before God to the point of self-deprecation. They do not have the joy they felt before their dark night journey or during phase four. All they can see is their misery and sin.

Finally, the seventh phase is recurrence and return. At last, the soul has emerged from the dark night, achieving divine union with God. Yet this is not the unrealistic happy ending of fairytales. The ex-vangelical will still have periods of hardship, along with periods of joy. Old

²¹⁰ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 209.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

²¹² Saint John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross: Revised Edition*, 406.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 409.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 418.

patterns will inevitably reoccur, and their joy will not be complete solely because there will always be evil and suffering in this earthly life.²¹⁵ Regardless, once the ex-vangelical arrives at the seventh phase, they can experience God in ways that were, to them, unfathomable during their dark night of the soul. As they emerge, they can perceive God's love for them once more. Additionally, they can embrace a new version of spirituality in their relationship with God that they did not know during their time in their evangelical context.

Much to my systematic mind's dismay, I must embrace the open-endedness of what the concept of ex-vangelicalism and a mystical interpretation of Jacob's story could mean for individual readers. I am on my own journey, just as Jacob was, and just as all contemporary readers striving to find answers for themselves and, ultimately, union with God. Yet with the help of sacred imagination of the biblical text and conversations in community, I believe there is space for all Christians to find peace both in the midst of their dark night of the soul as well as beyond it.

Areas for Further Study

In Chapter 4, I engaged disability theory with Jacob's hip injury, along with his family members who also encountered disabilities. I also touched on the very intimate nature of Jacob wrestling with his nighttime visitor and how it can also be read through the lens of queer hermeneutics. It is important to embrace these perspectives because the disabled and LGBTQIA+ communities have been historically unwelcome in evangelical spaces. Considering these perspectives will be helpful for disabled and LGBTQIA+ persons as they can relate to the text in a new way. Likewise, those who do not identify as disabled or queer can embrace fresh readings of this story, which can ultimately cultivate empathy.

²¹⁵ Muto, *John of the Cross for Today*, 210.

Evangelical culture assigns God with the pronouns “he/him,” valuing both hypermasculinity and physical wholeness. Jacob, on the other hand, left the Jabbok disabled as a result of him embracing a man all night long. This same Jacob—queer, disabled Jacob—became Israel. His miraculous story was passed through generations and generations of Israelites. His name became the identifier of God’s people. I am not convinced that Jacob, with his queerness and physical limitations, would be warmly accepted in an evangelical church today.

Therefore, conversations about new interpretations of the biblical text must continue. Queer, disabled, womanist, and feminist voices must be heard. These populations have been marginalized in evangelical spaces largely because of the emphasis on the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible. Evangelicalism as a whole highlights the voices, thought processes, and experiences of White, able-bodied, male Christians over all other contexts.²¹⁶ Texts like “All Scripture is God-breathed”²¹⁷ can be paired with scriptures like Rom 1:27 and Matt 9:27-31²¹⁸ to disempower queer and disabled persons. Because of this, pushing back against biblical infallibility is not a “challenge to God [but a challenge to] the White supremacist authoritarianism behind many interpretations of the biblical text.”²¹⁹ On the contrary, pushing against biblical infallibility resembles the image of Jacob wrestling with the unnamed man.

²¹⁶ Angela N. Parker, *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I?: Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority*, (Chicago: Eerdmans, 2021), 15.

²¹⁷ 1 Tim 3:16.

²¹⁸ For more on why this passage is problematic, see Walter T. Wilson, “Perception, Discipleship, and Revelation in the Gospel of Matthew,” *Journal of Disability & Religion* 19, no. 1 (2015): 66–84.

²¹⁹ Parker, *If God Still Breathes*, 15.

Closing Thoughts

In writing *The Dark Night of the Soul*, St. John provided an invaluable explanation of the confusion and distress an individual undergoes when they encounter separation from God. Yet, while the dark night is long, he also emphasizes the astonishing joy that is found once it is endured and the soul is reunited with God. Likewise, Jacob's story of his wrestle at the Jabbok (along with all of his life events that preceded it) interpreted as a dark night of the soul can be a profound interpretation for those who may be in the midst of their own dark night of the soul. It is a lonely journey. Nevertheless, it is rewarding. Even if the healed soul remains permanently altered and "wounded" by the dark night, there is a blessing on the other side.

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