

Consensus

Volume 35
Issue 2 *Care and Cure of the Soul*

Article 13

11-25-2014

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Recommended Citation

Harris, Mark W. (2014) "The Other Side of Jabbok," *Consensus*: Vol. 35: Iss. 2, Article 13.

DOI: 10.51644/GCNN7973

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol35/iss2/13>

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The Other Side of Jabbok

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Text: Genesis 32: 22-31

This is Jacob's story. That is really where we need to begin, by acknowledging that this familiar story of the wrestling at the Jabbok is all about Jacob. He is the focus, the character standing at center stage.

But even as we listen to this reading, we cannot assume that Jacob's is the only story, or even the only character in this story who is worth pondering. In Scripture as in life, those in the spotlight can so capture our attention that we completely overlook what is happening on the edges or in the margins. In doing so, we inadvertently neglect those stories that are suggested but left untold. Maybe we assume they have nothing to say or nothing of importance worth listening to. But sometime, just sometimes, if we can turn our attention beyond the obvious, we may see, hear, and find ourselves challenged and surprised in ways we never imagined. Indeed, we might even find God to be present and working in the margins, places where we least expect God to be found!

What would happen if we looked, in this story, where we did not expect the action to be? This *is* Jacob's story, after all, and I suspect that we have always heard it that way.

But have you ever wondered about the view of the other side of the Jabbok? What was the story of those whom this text does not even acknowledge by giving them names, but who were sent across the stream, so that Jacob could be left alone in his wrestling?

While today's text – in its single-minded focus on Jacob – does not name these characters, we know who they were... or at least some of them. Here, on the other side of the Jabbok was Rachel, with whom a younger Jacob had been so utterly smitten that he worked for seven years to win her hand in marriage, only to discover that Laban, his devious father-in-law, had slipped Rachel's older sister, Leah, into the marriage bed. As a result, Jacob had to work still another seven years to earn Rachel as his bride. Here, on the other side of the Jabbok was Rachel's son, Joseph, who was the apple of his father's eye, who would be sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, and who would end up in Pharaoh's household in Egypt. Here, on the other side of the Jabbok was Leah (the older sister) and her children, Ruben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah. Here, on the other side of the Jabbok was Rachel's handmaid, Bilhah, whom Rachel had given to Jacob when her own womb was barren, and the sons she bore, Dan and Naphtali. Here, on the other side of the Jabbok was Leah's handmaid, Zilpah, who had born Gad and Asher to Jacob as well.

So here, on the other side of the Jabbok, were Jacob's wives, maids, and children, as well as servants, herdsman, and their families that are not even numbered. And so, while the text barely mentions any of these, in its effort to tell Jacob's story, they were all there. They, too were heirs of the promise, the future of God's chosen people, and we can be certain that they had their own stories to tell.

It is curious to explore the commentators' interpretation of why Jacob sent the women and children across the Jabbok. Some explain that Jacob was trying to protect his family, put them out of harm's way! We can understand that! Others suggest a less noble motive. They propose that Jacob put the women and children between yourself and his approaching brother, Esau! In other words, he intentionally put them in harm's way! That way, if Esau should arrive, bent on vengeance, he could satisfy his blood lust on these defenseless women and children, and perhaps spare Jacob's conniving hide.

It is a pathetic strategy, but it nonetheless has the aroma of truth about it, perhaps... in part... because we know that strategy only too well in our own day. Over the last few weeks, as the Syrian government moved its military installations into residential neighbourhoods to protect them from US cruise missiles, thus putting women and children in harm's way to protect the interests of the powerful, they were doing exactly what Jacob had done. Closer to home, we know that strategy as well. When children on the Six Nations reserve receive 1/3 the education funding/child as do children in the Ontario public school system, just down the road, we are once again putting the innocents in harm's way. Or when our government continues to cut anti-poverty programs, which would benefit the most vulnerable members of our society, in order to reduce the taxes of the wealthy and powerful, we are back at the Jabbok yet again.

And those women, who sat across the stream from Jacob, probably knew exactly the situation they were in. Having lived with shrewd Jacob for so long, they knew exactly how he thought. They knew exactly what was going on. They were thrust – yet again - into the position of being sacrificial lambs, if necessary, paying the price that the vulnerable ones of every generation are too often called to make.

And so, while Jacob wrestled with God, on one side of the Jabbok, (working out his systematic theology, as it were), the women, on the other side, were absorbed in the kinds of practical theology that has almost always fallen to them ... tending the elderly, feeding and washing the children, putting them in bed, and cuddled them close to quiet their night-time fears... while those in power wrestled with the decisions that would determine the future of them all.

And all the while ... through the dark hours of the night... these women waited... prayed... tried to quiet their own racing hearts, and wondered what the morning would bring.

They, too, were children of the promise... all of them, gathered on the far side of the Jabbok. Yet we are so often focused upon Jacob and his wrestling, that we forget... the story of God's chosen people and of God's unfolding plan depended as much upon these vulnerable ones and their untold stories, as it did upon Jacob, whom we know so well.

What does this suggests to us, as we gather here as a community to celebrate God's presence and to seek God's guidance at the beginning of a new academic year.

Like Jacob, I suspect that we will all be challenged to engage in some wrestling over the coming months... wrestling with God, wrestling with ourselves (and assignments), wrestling with one another. But surely, part of that wrestling will also include learning how to listen, yes... to Jacob's story, but also to the voices on the other side of the Jabbok, those on the margins, those whom we are tempted to overlook or ignore. For they, too, are heirs of God's promise.

Those stories, from the other side of the Jabbok, may challenge and perplex us, and sometimes disrupt some of our long held convictions. As a result, we – like Jacob – may

emerge somewhat wounded from **this** holy encounter... less cocksure... but more human, more humble, more compassionate, and more filled with the Holy One, whose presence is to be found on both sides of the Jabbok.

It is worth noting that in the verses following today's reading, when Jacob finally goes out to meet Esau, it was no longer the women and children who are put at the fore, in harm's way; rather, it was a new Jacob, limping as a result of his wrestling, who led the company forth to meet his brother.

My prayer, as we begin this new year, is that none of us would come through this year untouched or unscathed. For it will be in the listening and the wrestling that God will meet us, changing and equipping us for the challenges that lie ahead. Amen.