

By seeing Jacob's all-night wrestling match through the lenses provided by other accounts of revolutionary grappling experiences and spiritual rebirth, we can learn much about the role of physicality in our spiritual lives.

GODWRESTLING: PHYSICALITY, CONFLICT, AND REDEMPTION IN MORMON DOCTRINE

By Rick Jepson

I AM A WRESTLER OF GREAT ENTHUSIASM AND moderate ability. In traveling to tournaments and making acquaintances from all over the world, I've frequently been asked tongue-in-cheek what it is about Mormonism that produces such great wrestlers. The two standout wrestlers in recent Olympics, Cael Sanderson and Rulon Gardner, are both LDS. So is Larry Owings, who beat Dan Gable thirty-two years earlier in what many regard as the best college wrestling match of all time. Some say the second best was when Mark Schultz, another Mormon, beat Ed Banach in 1982. At a seminar I once attended, Schultz joked that if someone wants to be a great wrestler, he should join the Church.

A year ago, I began looking to see if there might be something connecting these athletes with the first renowned Mormon wrestler, Joseph Smith—and perhaps even to the obscure Old Testament story of Jacob wrestling all night with an angel. Because I wasn't aware of the treasures hidden in the Genesis account, I wasn't looking for anything particularly profound. My original focus in examining Jacob's match was just on period wrestling styles. But that quickly changed as I came to better understand the key role his legendary wrestle played in transforming him from rascal to prophet. Some have even speculated that the way he proved himself in the match, both to himself and God, led to his having his calling and election made sure (see sidebar, page 20). Afterward, he limped away as Israel—the Godwrestler—father to a chosen nation.¹ Rabbis, theologians, and scholars have all identified with

Jacob's struggle and tried to emulate it in dealing with their own trials.

A LEGENDARY STRUGGLE

JACOB'S STORY IS familiar. After twice deceiving his brother, Jacob had fled for his life and taken refuge with his uncle. Two wives, two concubines, twelve sons, one daughter, and twenty years of servitude later, he was returning home. But word came that Esau was riding out to meet him with an army of four hundred. Fearing his brother's revenge, Jacob remained behind but sent his family across the river Jabbok bearing gifts. Then a stranger appeared who wrestled Jacob through the night. Although his hip was dislocated during the bout, the soon-to-be prophet finally won and refused to release his opponent until he identified himself and gave a blessing.

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.

And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him,



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and he halted upon his thigh. (Genesis 32:24–31)

Many biblical commentaries disregard Jacob's story, assuming it's either a fabrication or an adaptation from an earlier myth. The Genesis narrative is not unique in ancient literature, in which wrestling legends abound. The oldest known human writing includes the Sumerian saga of Gilgamesh, who changed from tyrant to hero after an epic wrestling match against the demigod Enkido.² Both Hercules³ and Samson outwrestled lions, which Brazilian grapplers commemorate with a devastating choke called *Mata Leão*—or “lion killer.” And Hercules went on to throw and pin several magical opponents.⁴ Early Christian writers describe Job as a wrestler who “threw his opponent in every wrestling bout.”⁵ Mohammed bested a disbeliever to prove his prophetic status.⁶ Even J.R.R. Tolkien's modern creation myth, *The Silmarilion*—which some call an Old Testament to the *Lord of the Rings*—has a god who “delights in wrestling and in contests of strength.”⁷

This ubiquity of ancient wrestling myths makes Jacob's struggle hard to take at face value, but the story's fairy tale qualities are even more problematic. His opponent's plea for release before sunrise seems more appropriate for a haunting vampire than a wrestling angel.⁸ To some critics, his refusal to divulge his name sounds like a Rumpelstiltskin-type tale.⁹ The location suggests to others the echo of a Canaanite river god story.¹⁰ Even among those who accept the scriptural veracity of the meeting, the match is most often interpreted allegorically.

Whether or not the Jacob story is accurate history, I believe we have to read it as such to grasp its depth. We must visualize Jacob grappling all night, much of it with a busted hip, or we'll miss the meaning. The author wants us to read it literally, and with good reason. Wrestling is hard. You can hardly breathe, your muscles burn, and you ache to give up. It takes soul to stay in the match—an internal drive not to quit. It's enough to instigate the kind of change that we see in Jacob.

SPIRITUAL PHYSICALITY

I WAS A green missionary in Boston when the Church celebrated the 150th anniversary of the pioneers entering the Salt Lake Valley. Caught up in the prevailing sentimentality, I was surprised when a ward member downplayed the struggles of the Martin Handcart Company. “It's not the physical trials that are hard,” she contended. “Anyone can cross the plains—what's hard is keeping spiritual commandments.”

My calling prevented any arguing with her, but I disagreed with her then and still do today. I believe physical events *are* spiritual. Our doctrine suggests as much: “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter” (D&C 131:7). All of our “spiritual” experiences have physical components. And if our spiritual experiences are all physical, it follows that the reverse is also true—our physical lives are intimately connected to our spiritual lives. LDS notions differ from standard Christian vitalism, where the physical is something different and beneath the spiritual.

We Latter-day Saints have largely ignored the uniqueness of spiritual physicality in our theology.¹¹ But it's still there. It's spelled out, and it's supported by our scriptures, our history, and our daily affairs. It's

why we benefit spiritually from physical adherence to the Word of Wisdom. It's why we go without food once a month. It's why in preparing to meet God, the brother of Jared carried his sixteen stones up the tallest mountain he could find.¹² It's why Martin Handcart survivors never left the gospel.¹³ And it's why Brigham Young said that prayer is great, but warm potatoes and pudding are better.¹⁴

The scriptures contain many examples of spiritual physicality, and athletic skill has historically been a qualification for leadership. After the burly prophet Elijah beat Baal's priests in a contest of Gods, he dishonored the pagan king by outrunning his chariot.¹⁵ Egyptian pharaohs demonstrated their fit-



JACOB WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL. BY GUSTAVE DORÉ

“Calling and Election”

IN A 1998 *ENSIGN* ARTICLE, ANDREW SKINNER suggests that Jacob might have received assurance of his calling and election after the all-night wrestling bout.¹ This claim piqued my interest because of my own uncertainty about this doctrine. A deeper investigation clarified for me that while it flies somewhat below the radar, the notion of having one’s “calling and election made sure” is a *bona fide* LDS doctrine, authenticated throughout our canon and literature. In fact, the month of my birth, the *Ensign* published a comprehensive article about calling and election.² The author, Roy Doxey, draws extensively from early and contemporary Church authorities and develops a simple definition: “Although the process of obtaining exaltation continues even into the spirit world, the knowledge that one will become exalted with the privileges of continuing on to eternal life can be certain in this life. This is what making one’s calling and election is all about.”³

Jacob’s experience after wrestling the stranger seems to fit quite well with the calling and election pattern. He claims to have seen Jehovah face-to-face and remembers years later the “angel which redeemed me from evil” (Genesis 48:16).

Other elements of the encounter are very similar to other sacred ordinances. He is reborn with a new—and much better—name. Instead of Jacob “the supplanter,” he becomes Israel, the *Godwrestler*.⁴ His wrestling clinch may have signified a ritual embrace.⁵ And the angel’s injurious touch to Jacob’s thigh may have had special commemorative signifi-



BATTLE OF JACOB AND AN ANGEL BY JAN SPYCHALSKI

cance. It was an important part of the anatomy in Jacob’s world, a place where oaths were formalized.⁶ Abraham’s servant had put his hand under the patriarch’s thigh when making a promise (Genesis 24:2–4). And Jacob later requests the same of his favored son, Joseph (Genesis 47:29–31). In the Revelation of John, we read that Christ will return with “KING OF KING, AND LORD OF LORDS” written on his thigh (Revelation 19:16). While Jacob’s overall encounter may differ greatly from contemporary temple ordinances, a similarity in these basic elements is suggestive of an endowing experience.⁷

It’s important to note that Jacob wasn’t perfect after his wrestling match and subsequent blessing. The very next morning, during the tearful reunion with Esau, he lies about where he is going and falsely promises to meet up with his brother again (Genesis 33:12–20).

Having a calling and election made sure does not make someone perfect. Brigham Young reminded the early saints that, “No blessing that is sealed upon us will do us any good, unless we live for it.”⁸ And more recently, Bruce R. McConkie clarified that recipients of this sealing are still imperfect and subject to the repentance process.⁹

What is important with Jacob is that a great change was wrought by his ordeal. Though he was still an imperfect mortal, there is an obvious improvement in his character. He is no longer scheming or uncertain. He suddenly has the confidence and power of a prophet. He has become a figure worthy of grouping with his father and grandfather in the oft-repeated phrase: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

(Notes for this sidebar on page 30)

ness to rule with a 120-yard dash.¹⁶ Persian princes proved authority by superior equestrianism.¹⁷ In ancient Japan, an emperor left his rule to the better wrestler of his two sons.¹⁸ And in ninth-century Byzantium, Basil I rose from humble origins to a place of prestige largely because of his wrestling prowess.¹⁹

The greatest and most spiritual event in human history was also the most physical. Christ’s atonement was a decidedly physical ordeal. It was the physicality of the atonement that disheartened him: “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:39). For there is no trial like physical pain, and no one could wish for it—not even for the sake of others.

In George Orwell’s *1984*, the imprisoned Winston Smith wonders about pain while he awaits certain torture. His lover has also been arrested and faces the same punishment. “If I

could save Julia by doubling my own pain,” he asks himself, “would I do it?” He knows the answer should be yes, but a baton blow to his elbow reveals the truth:

The elbow! He had slumped to his knees, almost paralyzed, clasping the stricken elbow with his other hand. Everything had exploded into yellow light. Inconceivable, inconceivable that one blow could cause such pain! . . . One question at any rate was answered. Never, for any reason on earth, could you wish for an increase of pain. Of pain you could only wish one thing: that it should stop. Nothing in the world was so bad as physical pain. In the face of pain there are no heroes, no heroes he thought over and over, as he writhed on the floor, clutching uselessly at his disabled left arm.²⁰

PHYSICAL PROPHETS

PHYSICALITY PUNCTUATED JOSEPH Smith's life, and his legendary wrestling mirrors Jacob's. Perhaps the best argument for Latter-day Saints reading the Genesis account literally is that we've had another strapping religious leader in our own time who also developed through physical ordeals.

Like Jacob, Joseph was the son of an aggressive mother and a visionary but withdrawn father: Father Smith was as debilitated by poverty as Isaac was by blindness. And like Jacob, Joseph grew up in the shadow of a favored brother—though their relationship was one of mutual admiration not envy.²¹ Joseph revered his oldest brother, Alvin, as uncommonly strong and the handsomest man since Adam.²² And more than anyone, Alvin believed in Joseph's discovery of the plates²³ and was even divinely called to attend their retrieval.²⁴ At the bed of his untimely death, Alvin encouraged Joseph to fulfill his prophetic destiny.²⁵ The Prophet commemorated his late brother's legacy with a namesake child.

Jacob and Joseph were both powerful men, but I don't think they always felt so. The young Jacob seems terrified of his rough brother. And Joseph must have felt impotent in the years following his leg operation, the first of many physical trials he would face. Treating a bone infection 120 years before the discovery of antibiotics required invasive surgery thirty years before the availability of anesthetics. So without providing any relief from pain, the surgeon bored three holes by hand through the bone and chipped off the exposed tissue with forceps.²⁶ For years afterward, Joseph was either in bed, carried by a family member, or up and around only on crutches. He limped and was defenseless against bullying.²⁷ He must have felt feeble compared to his hardy brothers.

How surprising to both men to grow into manhood and discover such physical strength. Joseph's athleticism has become almost folkloric—exaggerated by followers and disputed by critics.²⁸ He was tall and robust for his time, six feet in height and weighing more than 200 pounds, with a tapering torso and a musculature unhidden by clothes.²⁹ He outwrestled nearly all comers. Even as a weakened prisoner after enduring months at Liberty Jail, he lifted and threw a challenging guard.³⁰ He could beat stick-pulling champions using just one hand and could out-pull two opponents at once.³¹ When he retrieved the plates, he was accosted by three men, felling each.³² And

when the first mobster rushed up the stairs at Carthage, Joseph sent him rolling back down with two quick punches. The man never reascended and later gave the prophet a grudging compliment, calling him a "damn stout man."³³

According to the text, Jacob's strength was also remarkable. When he fled Esau's rage and arrived in their mother's homeland, he encountered a group of shepherds stationed around a well. A huge stone was rolled over it to keep the water fresh, and every morning the men gathered until there were enough of them to remove it. When Jacob noticed a beautiful woman approaching, he quickly volunteered to move the stone by himself. If he was trying to show off, it worked. The woman, his cousin Rachel, immediately greeted him; the two kissed and wept (Genesis 29: 1–11).

Both Joseph and Jacob had to scuffle before facing God. Jacob wrestled the mysterious stranger and won despite the injury to his hip; Joseph grappled with a darker adversary. When he knelt in the grove, he wasn't overshadowed by some menacing nebula but attacked by a real demon. He heard its footsteps approaching from behind³⁴ and described it as "an actual being from the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being" (Joseph Smith—History 1:16).

I have wondered if Joseph felt any special connection to Jacob. He was certainly aware of the ancient wrestling prophet. Once, in a playful match, Joseph accidentally broke a friend's ankle, and the two of them joked that Joseph should at least have to bless him like the angel had Jacob.³⁵

Perhaps thinking of Jacob, Joseph used wrestling terminology to describe spiritual events. In the Book of Mormon, Enos writes, "I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before



"I'm looking for Joe Smith, the legendary prophet, seer, and stick puller"

God, before I received a remission of my sins” (Enos 1:2). And we read that Alma also “labored much in the spirit, wrestling with God in mighty prayer” (Alma 8:10). John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper suggest that these Book of Mormon prophets were familiar with Jacob’s story and influenced by it.³⁶ But maybe it was Joseph who identified with Jacob. Whatever the nuts and bolts of translating the Book of Mormon were, the translation was his—his vocabulary and phraseology played a part.³⁷ Another translator might have written *struggle* or *trial*.³⁸ In either case, Jacob’s physical ordeal was profound enough for later prophets to identify with and refer to in describing their own spiritual struggles.

WRESTLING FOR ONE’S LIFE

IT’S HARD TO put a face on Jacob’s opponent, though many have tried. From the text, we gather that it could have been a man, an angel, or even God. One Jewish legend holds that it was Michael, who had been a guardian angel to Jacob since the womb.³⁹ Another suggests that it was Esau’s guardian angel, Samael.⁴⁰ But the match wasn’t just between two combatants; it was also Jacob’s personal struggle to correct an entire life.

Some of the best wrestlers struggle with personal demons. Their opponent becomes an embodiment of poverty, divorce, abuse, failure, or whatever haunts them—and they push all the harder because of it. That fixation makes them difficult to defeat because they risk losing more than the match; any loss is a submission to the monsters that plague them. Dan Gable was undefeated, 118–0, through his college career until he lost his very last match to Larry Owings at the NCAA championship.⁴¹ His face didn’t show disappointment; it was desolation. For all those years, he had been fighting the man who had broken into his boyhood home, then raped and killed his sister—and now he had finally lost.⁴²

When Ebenezer Scrooge could no longer stand the memories of Christmases past, he tried to wrestle away the spirit who had brought them. As he turned and clinched, he was shocked to see the messenger’s face “in which, in some strange way, there were fragments of all the faces it had shown him” that night.⁴³ Like Jacob, Ebenezer grappled not just with his present foe, but with all the haunting images of a past ill spent. We can only speculate what faces Jacob saw on his adversary, but they likely included his own, his brother’s, his father’s, his uncle’s, and his God’s. He genuinely struggled with God and men and persevered.

His mother’s face may also have been among the many he saw. It is uncommon to wrestle one’s mother, but it can happen. A champion wrestler and dear friend of mine endured twenty years of physical abuse before wrestling free of his mother’s violence. The liberating impulse came one evening while standing at attention as she whipped him incessantly with an extension chord. He suddenly grabbed both her wrists and held firm until resistance ceased. We call that “wrist control” in the sport, and it’s used to escape dangerous holds. One of the first lessons a young wrestler learns is to control the op-

ponent’s wrists before attempting escape—grab the wrists and then stand up. Otherwise you’ll be sucked back into his control.

On this occasion, wrist control was all it took. She accepted the changed relationship, and he was never abused again. Ironically, his passion for the sport wilted that night, and his distinguished career was cut short. Years later, he reflected that he had really been wrestling her all along. Once he had been victorious, his grappling lacked its fundamental motivation.

Rebekah never harmed Jacob, but she smothered her favorite son from the beginning. While Esau romped around the forest, she kept the milder Jacob studying inside the tent. It was she who prodded him to deceive Isaac, and she who shooed him away when it backfired. Nor did he even escape her in his exile; he labored two decades in her land and among her clan.

Jacob had adopted his mother’s no-holds-barred approach to fulfilling his destiny. Together they could justify any means—bartering, lying, stealing—because the end was divinely ordained. But the Lord hardly needed their assistance, and their meddling was disastrous. As Jacob sat alone across the river from Esau’s army of four hundred, perhaps he finally wanted to escape the maternal pressure that had caused so much trouble.

But Jacob had also become his own worst enemy. He stands out among early Old Testament figures because though he repeats the established patterns of his fathers, he seems more human. Like Abraham and Isaac, he saw visions, married a close relative who struggled with infertility, favored one child over another, and—with his wrestling—went through a momentous ordeal fearing for his life. But unlike his predecessors, Jacob cut corners, bargained, and got distracted. He’s been criticized for seeking outside approval, for a lack of initiative, and for his duplicity.⁴⁴

This inconsistency and immaturity perplexes the believer. Why would God favor such a person to become the father of all Israel? So it seems necessary to clean up the text.⁴⁵ The Jewish traditions go the furthest in redeeming Jacob from his own story. Every misdeed is couched in explanation: Jacob was supposed to be firstborn but conceded it to save his mother’s life.⁴⁶ He bought the birthright with money and treasures, not just with lentil soup.⁴⁷ And Isaac knew all along that it was Jacob he was blessing.⁴⁸ The Midrash tradition is one of contrast, a story of good and evil with characters purposely polarized to represent these twin forces.

But today many Christians and Jews recognize that a deeper understanding comes from recognizing rather than rationalizing Jacob’s full person.⁴⁹ Jacob is the everyman, and that is what makes his wrestling transformation resonate with us. Like us, he is distracted by everyday affairs. We share his Promethean tendency to want to live as mere humans despite our godly potential. In his story, we realize our own need to be transformed by grappling with ourselves, our past, and before our God. Jacob did just that when the mysterious stranger appeared.

And this was no small contest. The thought of grappling all

night is staggering. Prime athletes are exhausted after just a six-minute match. Recent history has seen some similarly epoch matches, like Helson Gracie's four-hour loss against Valdemar Santana and Frank Gotch's two-hour victory over George Hackenschmidt. But these bouts took a huge toll on the competitors. Gracie retired after his loss, and Gotch, though victorious, complained, "It is likely I may never be as good a man again because of that match. Such a contest is a terrible shock to a man's system, no matter how strong or well trained he may be."⁵⁰

Jacob was certainly different after his match. He emerged from the exhausting and injurious night as a new person, changed emotionally and spiritually. After being blessed, seeing God, and receiving his new name, he confidently crossed the river to face Esau in repentant love (See sidebar, page 25). He became the father of all Israel, a prophet celebrated throughout our canon.

MAKING LOVE, MAKING WAR

THERE'S A CERTAIN catharsis that follows any physical exertion. Nerves from the brain and spine release endorphins, little chains of amino acids that function in the body much like a narcotic. The result is just what you would expect from taking an opiate, like morphine—a feeling of relaxation and euphoria. In fact, the word endorphin literally means "endogenous morphine," or morphine from the inside body.⁵¹

Besides that chemical high, any combative sport can give an additional type of exhilaration, that which comes from self-realization and bonding with an opponent. There's something about attacking and being attacked that brings out your personality. You learn a lot about yourself: your fears, your abilities, and your resilience. And your opponent is just as exposed and self-conscious as you are. It's traumatic for both, and that's what makes it a shared, bonding experience.

Plato, who was an accomplished wrestler, said "we obtain better knowledge of a person during one hour's play and games than by conversing with them for a whole year."⁵² And it seems Joseph Smith may have agreed. He was often criticized for his unsanctimonious playfulness, sometimes even by family members or friends. Once Hyrum chided him for playing with a group of boys. But Joseph defended himself, saying, "It makes them happy and draws their hearts nearer to mine; and who knows but there may be young men among them who may sometime lay down their lives for me!"⁵³

Boxing, wrestling, "ultimate fighting," and usually even street fights are just versions of the ritualized violence found everywhere in the animal kingdom. While there's a winner and a loser, both parties can walk away from the fight. If one stag died every time there was a dispute over territory or mates, there wouldn't be many deer left.⁵⁴ So as they charge at each other, they carefully measure their attacking angles. If it looks like they might hit bodies instead of antlers, they quickly pivot out of their trajectories and start over.⁵⁵

A few years ago, the novelist Chuck Palahniuk got into his

Godwrestling

I wrestled again with my brother last week,
First time since I was twelve
and Grandma stopped us:
"She won't even let us fight!"
we yelled, embracing,
Wrestling feels a lot like
making love.

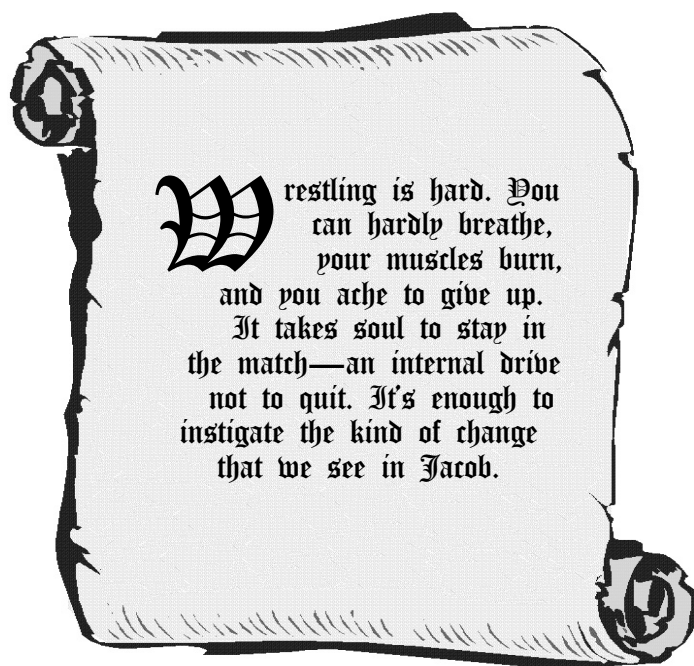
Why did Jacob wrestle with God,
Why did the others talk?
God surely enjoyed that all-night
fling with Jacob:
Told him he'd won,
Renamed him and us
the "Godwrestler,"
Even left him a limp to be
sure he'd remember it all.
But ever since, we've only talked
we've only talked.
Did something peculiar happen
that night?
Did somebody say next day we
shouldn't wrestle? Who?

We should wrestle again our
Companion sometime soon.
Wrestling feels a lot like making
love.

But Esau struggled
to his feet
from his own Wrestle,
And gasped across the river
to his brother:
It also
feels
a lot
like
making
war.

Arthur Waskow

Godwrestling—Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths
(Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 1996), 19–20.



first fistfight. Afterward, he began reflecting on the “redeeming value to taking a punch under controlled circumstances”⁵⁶ and started writing a best-selling novel, *Fight Club*. When the movie version hit theaters, people identified with its message: the liberating and integrating use of controlled violence to escape an affectless world.

In Utah, a phenomenon began. High school and college students all over the state started sneaking into parks, schools, and even church gyms to strap on boxing gloves and stage amateur fights. The press was negative—particularly when then-Governor Michael Leavitt’s son got arrested for his participation—but the bouts were controlled.⁵⁷ Most groups employed some type of referee, and combatants were normally matched up according to similarity in size and skill. Most bouts were friendly, and most fighters left feeling euphoric, self-aware, and connected.

While any combative experience may produce this type of bonding and self-realization, wrestling is particularly suited to do so because a wrestler seeks to subdue an opponent without doing damage. No pure form of wrestling allows for serious striking. And while the domination of an opponent—by off-setting, immobilizing, or submitting him—is the central aim of any wrestler, the obliteration of that opponent never enters the equation.⁵⁸ A successful wrestler dominates his opponent without crushing him. Even in the aggressive submission styles of wrestling that employ painful chokes and joint hyper-extensions (such as judo or jiu-jitsu), most practitioners pride themselves on causing only momentary pain and vigilantly avoid injuring other competitors.⁵⁹

Several years ago, the Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote a poem about Jacob’s wrestling match, building around a theme that while wrestling feels “a lot like making war” it also feels “a lot like making love” (See full text of poem, page 23). A strained

relationship with his own brother uncovered for Waskow an important aspect of Jacob’s story: it tells us how to fight someone we love. We do it while embracing. This intimate aspect of wrestling is important to its symbolism. As one Torah teacher in Jerusalem explained, “To wrestle is to embrace. It’s a very intimate bodily encounter, legs around legs, and arms around arms, intertwined. . . . There’s an erotic element to it.”⁶⁰

As I face an opponent, one of the strongest positions I can obtain is wrapping both arms around his torso and hugging him in tightly. Then I can dump him, trip him, or throw him. But we’ll remain in that embrace. And regardless of whom or what I may be fighting, I can also choose this same approach.

I suspect it was the same with Jacob. As he wrestled all the hundred faces that met him, he tried to overcome but not obliterate them. He still loved his brother, his mother, his self, and his God. So he wasn’t kicking or eye gouging.

I’ve had that kind of encounter before. In high school, my best friend was three years my elder and everything I wasn’t: confident, athletic, popular, and a “ladies’ man.” Our relationship was largely defined by bullying—and I was the perpetual victim. But one day halfway through my first season of wrestling, our friendship was redefined. For some offense I can’t even begin to remember, I found myself running for my life with him on my heels swinging a plastic bat. I was much slower, and quickly realized the inevitability of being overtaken. Having no obvious alternatives, I spun around and shot in at his legs. The result surprised us both. There I was on top of him with one hand on his neck and the other cocked back to strike—and the conflict was over. We were ever after equals in our friendship. There had been no kicking, punching, or biting—for then the friendship may have ended. There was just that violent hug that brings down and subdues an opponent.

A decade ago, Bill Moyers assembled a diverse group to discuss the Book of Genesis. When Jacob’s story came up, one panelist shared his own experience wrestling with his father, who had forbidden him to pursue a career in art. He ultimately had to challenge his father physically to be released. “It couldn’t be done in a reasonable way,” he explained. “He had to be overcome in a way in which he understood authority.” As they wrestled, his father “immediately arrived at a state in which he could say, ‘You are free—and free with my blessing.’ It wasn’t, ‘Get the hell out of here and never darken this door again!’”⁶¹

Taking the wrestling posture is also the way to win fights between whole nations. In this kind of struggle, parties operate with mutual decency and a shared regret for the circumstances that led them into the conflict. They fight each other doggedly but do not hate. I’m reminded of the spontaneous Christmas truces all over the front lines of World War I,⁶² and of soldiers at Gettysburg from both armies meeting nightly at a well to drink coffee and share letters.⁶³

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, recently gave an interview where he outlined eleven important lessons learned during his tenure.

Jacob and Esau

EVEN FROM BEFORE BIRTH, WRESTLING WAS A part of Jacob's life. He and Esau struggled constantly in the womb, tearing and bruising their mother. In twenty years of marriage, she had been unable to conceive, but now, even though she was finally pregnant, her sorrow continued. She turned to God in her own wrestle: "If it be so, why am I thus?" (Genesis 25:22).

The response came. It was her calling to mother two antagonizing peoples: "Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger" (verse 23).

On the day of their delivery, the two boys continued their wrestle. Jacob latched onto his brother's heel as if to pull him back into the womb, as if to usurp his place as firstborn. Because of this, his father gave him the lowly name Jacob, a wordplay referring both to the anatomical heel and the kind of person we might still call a heel—a *supplanter* (verse 26).

The two boys grew into manhood, each being the favorite of one parent (verse 28). Rebekah, remembering the revelation, doted on Jacob. And Isaac, maybe longing for his estranged brother, Ishmael, favored the red and hairy Esau. Though Jacob seems to have been a great deal more like his father, we don't always like seeing our reflections.¹

Jacob and Esau had two encounters that were severe enough to be mentioned in the biblical narrative, and both reveal Jacob's wiliness. When his sturdy brother returned famished from a long hunt, Jacob offered him some stew, but only in exchange for the birthright. "Behold I am at the point to die," Esau sighed, "what profit shall this birthright do to me?" (Genesis 25:32). The text subjectively tells us how little Esau valued that blessing (verse 34), but the story also shows us to what lengths Jacob would go to wrest his brother's rightful inheritance.

A while later, Jacob went on to trick his blind father into giving him a blessing intended for Esau. Isaac had sent the older son out to hunt him some fresh meat and promised the blessing upon his successful return (Genesis 27:1–4). But Rebekah devised an elaborate deception. She roasted two goat kids and draped their skins over Jacob's neck and arms so the patriarch would think it was Esau (verses 6–17). The ruse worked, and Esau returned with venison only to find that his blessing had been given away. "Is not he rightly named Jacob," Esau complained, "for he hath supplanted me these two times" (verse 36).

Esau boiled in rage and sought Jacob's life (Genesis 27:41),

so Jacob fled to the refuge of his mother's brother (verses 42–45). The exodus was fortunate, because it made a man out of the crafty Jacob. On the way there, he had a vision of angels climbing a ladder to heaven (Genesis 28:12). The Lord stood above it and spoke to him, promising that he would someday return to his home and father a numberless progeny (verse 13). In his mother's homeland, Jacob discovered his strength (Genesis 29:10), fell in love (verses 11, 18), and became a successful herdsman (Genesis 30:29–30). But he also learned how it felt to be dealt with underhandedly. His uncle tricked him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (29:21–26), forced him to double his indentured servitude (verse 27), and chased him down when Jacob tried to leave (31:22–23).

After twenty years, when Jacob had finally broken free and was just across the river from returning home, he had the greatest struggle of his life. Word came that Esau was coming straight toward him with an army of four hundred men (Genesis 32:6). Now that Jacob understood the injury he had caused his brother, he could only guess how it had festered over two decades. He repentantly sent his family and flocks ahead of him with this message: "They be thy servant Jacob's; it is a present sent unto my lord Esau" (verse 18).

And then, to Jacob, alone by the river banks and afraid of the impending reunion, a stranger appeared who wrestled him through the night.



THE MEETING OF JACOB AND ESAU BY GUSTAVE DORE

THE TEXT FOCUSES on Jacob, and so do we. But that same night Esau had his own wrestle on the other side of the river. When Jacob had fled twenty years earlier, their father had finally given in to Esau's pleading and offered a consolation blessing. In it, Isaac promised his elder son that while he would be a servant to his brother, he would also someday break Jacob's yoke from off his neck (Genesis 27:40).

Now that promised day had finally come, but Esau had to decide how to fulfill his own promise. He had become a prosperous man and sat at the head of a large army. He could easily slay Jacob, as he had wanted to. But he could also accept the peace offering, overcome his anger, and break free in the fullest and greatest sense.

As it happened, Esau chose the high road. He ran to meet his brother in a tearful embrace that ended the wrestling clinch they had been in since before birth. Jacob was so delighted that he compared the joy of seeing Esau to the divine visit from the night before: "I have seen thy face, as though I had seen the face of God" (Genesis 33:10).

(Note for this sidebar are found on page 30)

As I face an opponent,
 one of the strongest
 positions I can
 obtain is wrapping both
 arms around his torso
 and hugging him in tightly.
 Then I can dump him, trip
 him, or throw him. But we'll
 remain in that embrace.
 And regardless of whom or
 what I may be fighting, I can
 also choose this same approach.



CHELSEA BUSH

The first was “empathize with your enemy.” Comparing the success of the Cuban Missile Crisis with failures in Vietnam, he deemed that the difference was in empathy and understanding.⁶⁴ They knew Khrushchev personally and could guess at his motivation. But with the Vietnamese, our government acted with “profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders.”⁶⁵

Our country is currently engaged in a war with a people and culture very different than our own. There is suspicion, fear, and hatred on both sides, and neither knows much about the other. It’s the mutual estrangement that begets atrocities such as 9-11 and Abu Ghraib. But if we can approach this conflict with the wrestling stance, if we can hug while strangling, maybe we can avoid some of the ugliness of war.

WRESTLING GOD

I ALSO WRESTLE at church. As I deal with my nagging questions or bite my lip in Elders Quorum, I can choose to hold my faith close while I thrash it about with critical inquiry. I can simultaneously pummel and em-

brace the Church. I relate to Hugh Nibley’s statement: “There might be things about the Church that I find perfectly appalling. But I know the gospel is true.”⁶⁶ I need not attack it, only wrestle it.

Maybe even our praying should be more like wrestling. It’s so easy to slip into patterns and repetitions without really praying. I can think of a dozen times I’ve accidentally blessed the food while saying my bedtime prayers. And how many more times has someone at a ward activity blessed the brownies and soda to “nourish and strengthen our bodies”? My praying is so formulaic that if I ever stray from the basic blueprint at family prayers, my three-year-old takes note and asks me about it afterward.

Enos and Alma both wrestled with God in prayer (Enos 1:2, Alma 8:10). And some of the best-recorded prayers read more like matches than recitals. When Joseph Smith called out from the misery of Liberty Jail, he didn’t hold back: “O God, where art thou? . . . How long shall thy hand be stayed?” (D&C 121:1–6).

Christ’s prayer on the cross is the most grappling invocation I know of. He didn’t offer his whole prayer out loud, but he didn’t need to. When in the height of his suffering he cried out, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*,” I think he meant for us to remember the whole 22nd Psalm:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
 why art thou so far from helping me, and from the
 words of my roaring? . . .

But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praise
 of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and
 thou didst deliver them. . . .

But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men,
 and despised of the people. All they that see me laugh
 me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the
 head. . . .

But thou art he that took me out of the womb:
 thou didst make me hope when I was upon my moth-
 er’s breasts. . . . Be not far from me; for trouble is near;
 for there is none to help.

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are
 out of joint. . . . The assembly of the wicked have in-
 closed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. . . .
 They part my garments among them, and cast lots
 upon my vesture.

But be not thou far from me, O LORD: O my
 strength, haste thee to help me. . . . I will declare thy
 name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congrega-
 tion will I praise thee.

This psalm describes a real struggle—with God and self. A few lines of pushing away followed by a few more pulling back in. Pushing and pulling over and over. That’s what it feels like to wrestle God. If I avoid that kind of grappling in my own prayers, it’s from estrangement rather than reverence. I can struggle that way with my wife or with a sibling. I know them; my love for them is never in doubt even in the hottest argument. Maybe I should get to know the Lord well enough that I can wrestle when I pray.

As Lowell Bennion wrote:

God himself does not seem to object to our questioning even him and his ways. Abraham persuaded the Lord to save Sodom if He could find ten righteous souls. Jacob wrestled with his heavenly antagonist until he got his way. And most impressive of all, Job challenged God's justice and compassion and stood by his own integrity through an extended debate⁶⁷

The most important revelations of any time, including the 1978 reversal of racial exclusion regarding the priesthood, come from wrestling with the matter and then questioning the Lord point blank.

WRESTLING AS ATONEMENT

ALITERAL INTERPRETATION of Jacob's wrestling creates a blueprint for our own path to overcoming personal deficits and becoming at one with God. Of course this doesn't mean that our own wrestling will necessarily be literal. We may not, and likely need not, wrestle with a stranger through the night to gain our salvation. As Paul writes, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). And while wrestling is a big part of my life and the vehicle of this study, it's not meant to be the central theme. It's only important to me as a reminder of the atonement it can symbolize.

Being sentimental about any sport is dangerous; it too frequently leads to exaggeration. Like baseball writers who obsess about the metaphor of a lost American innocence, some grapplers have overstated the importance of wrestling. The trend became especially acute when Title IX legislation required universities to offer the same number of female and male sports. Since wrestling is boring to watch, brings in little revenue, and has traditionally been gender exclusive, programs all over the country were dropped. Enthusiasts responded with rhetoric crediting wrestling for everything from the American Revolution and emancipation of the slaves to the heroism of Flight 93.⁶⁸

Wrestling is great. It can have rich symbolism, and I believe it's powerful enough to catalyze a personal rebirth. It has been an important positive force in my life, and I derive from it personal meaning that extends far beyond the actual activity. It is potently used in mythology, scripture, spiritual reflection, and diplomacy. But it isn't essential to salvation. We shouldn't skip ward temple night to hit the mats. We need not leave the Church to join the Christian Wrestling Federation—where characters named Apocalypse, Angel, Martyr, and The Beast bash each other with garbage cans and folding chairs.⁶⁹

Wrestling is like any other human activity—we can endow it with meaning and use it to reflect the divine. Others have touched God by harvesting yams or fixing boats.⁷⁰ I've done it by approaching the veil, being with my wife, reading to my kids, climbing mountains, and, on a few occasions, by bearing down on an opponent and choking him until his face turns purple. ☞

NOTES

1. The definition of the name "Israel" is ambiguous. There is no reliable etymology for the name. See James Dunn & John Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 61 and James Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 107. Nevertheless, the Bible text suggests that it is related to his struggle: "For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (Genesis 32:28). The notes in the LDS version of the KJV render it: "for thou hast persevered with God," where the translation of Israel is extrapolated as "He perseveres (with) God." The LDS Bible Dictionary prefers, "One who prevails with God" (p. 708). Others have chosen a definition more reflective of the wrestling to which the name refers. Buckner Trawick offers "contender with God." See Buckner B. Trawick, *The Bible as Literature: the Old Testament and Apocrypha* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1970), 60. My personal favorite comes from the Rabbi Arthur Waskow, one who wrestles with God or "Godwrestler." See his *Godwrestling—Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1996), 25.

2. Benjamin R. Foster, ed. and trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 16–17.

3. Richard P. Martin, *Myths of the Ancient Greeks* (New York: New American Library, 2003), 151.

4. *Ibid.*, 156–58.

5. Quoted from a Byzantine lexicon in Michael Poliakov, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 144.

6. Mohammed was in Mecca when he encountered a disbeliever who was famous for his strength. "If I knew that what you say is true I would follow you," the man claimed. So the prophet asked if beating him in wrestling would be enough to prove the veracity of his message. The man agreed, and they began to wrestle. When Mohammed secured a firm grip, he lifted and threw his opponent. "Do it again, Mohammed," he challenged, and the prophet complied. See Muhammad Ibn Ishak, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 178.

Joseph Smith's humor and athleticism are revealed in two parallel experiences. A sarcastic doubter called out to Joseph in the shrill, high-pitched shout then popular in some religious speech: "Is it possible that I now flash my optics upon a Prophet?" Joseph answered affirmatively and then quipped, "I don't know but you do; would not you like to wrestle with me?" See Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 25. On another occasion, a group of sectarian ministers tried to stump the prophet with a series of difficult scriptural questions. After answering them satisfactorily, he issued his own challenge to them. He stepped outside, scraped a line on the ground, planted both feet behind it and sprung forward as far as he could. Then he turned to the challengers and said, "Which one of you can beat that!" See Alexander Baugh, "Joseph Smith's Athletic Nature," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, The Man*, Susan Easton Black and Charles Tate, eds., (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1993), 143.

7. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarilion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 27.

8. Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1957), 179; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translations and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 181; See also Mays, *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 107.

9. Bill Moyers, *Genesis: A Living Conversation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 294; Mays, *Ibid.*

10. John Barton & John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 59; Mays, *Ibid.*; and Dunn & Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, 61.

11. Duane E. Jeffery comments insightfully on this matter: "Mormon spokesmen have glimpsed a view radically different from the usual Christian positions and their tenets are very poorly appreciated in the church today. This lack of appreciation seems to result more from neglect than from any shift in doctrine. The basic concepts, tentative though they are, have been so covered with the cobwebs of time that to most Mormons today even their basic outlines are obscured; the general concept in the church today is essentially standard Christian." Duane E. Jeffery, "Seers, Savants, and Evolution: The Uncomfortable Interface," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2001): 200.

12. For a discussion of the story of how the brother of Jared's physical trials may have played an integral role in his preparations to receive a visitation from Jehovah, see footnote 7 of the "Calling and Election" sidebar (page 30).

13. David O. McKay, "The Angels of God Were There," *Relief Society Magazine*,

January 1948, 8.

14. From a sermon printed in *Deseret News*, 10 December 1856. Quoted in Eugene England, "Brigham's Gospel Kingdom," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 355.

15. About the significance of this victory, John A. Tvedtnes wrote: "In the ancient Near East, it was traditional to test the powers of the king—the chief warrior of his people—by having him run a footrace and throw a javelin. . . . The Lord may have used this tradition to strengthen his position in the eyes of the Canaanites as the one true God." John A. Tvedtnes, "Elijah: Champion of Israel's God," *Ensign*, July 1990, 54.

16. Allen Guttmann, "Old Sports," *Natural History* (July 1992): 51.

17. *Ibid.*, 53.

18. Oscar Ratti and Adele Westbrook, *Secrets of the Samurai: The Martial Arts of Feudal Japan* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1973), 336.

19. Poliakoff, 140–41.

20. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Signet, 1949), 197.

21. Lucy Mack Smith originally favored Alvin as the (religious) leader of the family. See Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 55.

22. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–1951), 5:247.

23. Their mother wrote that Alvin "manifested, if such could be the case, greater zeal and anxiety in regard to the Record that had been shown to Joseph, than any of the rest of his family." Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Stevens & Wallis, 1945), 89.

24. Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 31. Alvin unfortunately died before Joseph retrieved the plates.

25. On his deathbed, Alvin's last words to Joseph were: "I am now going to die, the distress which I suffer, and the feelings that I have, tell me my time is very short. I want you to be a good boy, and do everything that lies in your power to obtain the Record. Be faithful in receiving instruction, and in keeping every commandment that is given you. Your brother Alvin must leave you; but remember the example which he has set for you; and set the same example for the children that are younger than yourself, and always be kind to father and mother." See Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother*, 87.

26. Bushman, 21; Madsen, 20.

27. Bushman, 29.

28. For example, Elder S. Dilworth Young claims: "No man was ever able to throw him in a wrestling match or to match him in the sports of those days, like pulling sticks, or thumbs, or fingers, or any of the things men do to vie with each other for strength." See Elder S. Dilworth Young, *BYU Speeches of the Year*, 1966, 8). Such a view is disputed by William Law, a former second counselor to the prophet who later left the church, who writes, "The forces of the prophet in this line have been exaggerated. My brother Wilson wrestled once with him and he laid him down on the floor like a baby. . . . Joseph was flabby; he never worked at anything and that probably made him so" (*Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, 31 July 1887, 6). The truth lies somewhere in between. While his physical strength was clearly remarkable, *nobody* wins every match. Still, his record was impressive enough that people noticed when he lost (Baugh, 141–42).

29. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, 20.

30. Baugh, 140–41.

31. *Ibid.*, 142–43.

32. In *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Richard Bushman describes Joseph's adventures home with the plates as follows: "While he was scrambling over a tree that had fallen across his path, a man struck him with a gun. Joseph knocked the man down and ran off at full speed, still with the heavy plates under his arm. A half mile further he was assaulted again and again made his escape. Yet a third time someone tried to stop him before he finally reached home, speechless with fright and fatigue and suffering from a dislocated thumb" (page 60).

33. Madsen, 122.

34. Milton V. Backman Jr., *Joseph Smith's First Vision: Confirming Evidences and Contemporary Accounts*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 159.

35. Baugh, 140.

36. John A. Tvedtnes and Matthew Roper, "Jacob and Enos: Wrestling before God," *FARMS Update* 21, no. 5 (2001). (Electronic copy accessed 4 January 2005 from <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=insights&id=194>).

37. Stephen D. Ricks, "Joseph Smith's Translation of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 201–06. (Accessed 6 November 2005 from <http://farms.byu.edu/display.php?table=jbms&id=41>).

38. Support for the idea that Joseph used the term where others may not have is found in a discourse Joseph gave about the father of John the Baptist: "Zachariah having no children knew that the promise of God must fail, consequently he went into the Temple to wrestle with God according to the order of the priesthood." See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, A (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 235.

39. Hayim N. Bialik and Yehoshua H. Ravnitzky, *The Book of Legends Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 49; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), 385.

40. Harry Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary, and Indices*, vol. 2 (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 711.

41. It's interesting, though not significant, that Owings is LDS and that the wrestler who finally beat Gable's college record, Cael Sanderson, is too.

42. This is, of course, my own assessment of Gable's motivation. But it's not without supporting evidence. Gable has been open about the effect his sister's murder had on him, saying, "It made me even more of a horse with blinders as far as wrestling went." And he later compared the pain of losing to what he felt that day: "I had never experienced something that traumatic in athletics. I would have to go back to when my sister was killed my sophomore year." See Mike Finn, "Dan Gable the Olympian: Former Collegiate Golden Boy Became Man in Munich," (accessed 18 September 2005 from <http://www.win-magazine.com/active/archives/v10i10/gablefeature.html>), and Mike Puma, "Gable Dominated as Wrestler and Coach," (accessed 18 September 2005 from http://espn.go.com/classic/biography/s/Gable_Dan.html).

43. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (New York: Dover, 1991), 30. Reading the full quote from Dickens makes me wonder if he might have been inspired by Jacob's ordeal in Genesis: "He turned upon the Ghost, and seeing that it looked upon him with a face, in which in some strange way there were fragments of all the faces it had shown him, wrestled with it."



44. See, for example: Moyers, 279–81; Trawick, 60; Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 110–11.

45. LDS commentaries do this as much as any others. The LDS Bible Dictionary claims that the “supposed deception of his father in obtaining the blessing cannot be taken at face value” and that the “so-called purchase of the birthright from Esau may very well be equally justified by items of Esau’s errant behavior that disqualified him, but which are not recorded in our Bible” (709). A 1998 *Ensign* article blames Esau for the loss of birthright and blessing. See Andrew Skinner, “Jacob: Keeper of Covenants,” *Ensign*, March 1998, 50. But the Church Education System study guide for the Old Testament breaks from this common approach to give a very balanced and objective view: “Although the early patriarchs and their wives were great and righteous men and women who eventually were exalted and perfected (see D&C 13:37), this fact does not mean that they were perfect in every respect while in mortality. If the story is correct as found in Genesis, Isaac may have been temporarily shortsighted in favoring Esau. Or Rebekah may have had insufficient faith in the Lord to let him work his will and therefore undertook a plan of her own to ensure that the promised blessings would come to pass. These shortcomings do not lessen their later greatness and their eventual perfection.” See *Old Testament Student Manual: Genesis–2 Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 85.

46. Ginzberg, 313–14.

47. *Ibid.*, 321.

48. *Ibid.*, 333.

49. Two Jewish examples favoring this approach include the previously cited works by Arthur Waskow and Elie Wiesel. Two Christian examples are Henry F. Knight, “Meeting Jacob at the Jabbok: Wrestling with a Test—A Midrash on Genesis 32:22–32,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 24, no. 3–4, (Summer/Fall 1992): 451–60, and William Becker, “The Black Tradition of Spiritual Wrestling,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 51, no. 2 (Winter 1994/Spring 1995): 29–46.

50. Quoted in Matthew Lindaman, “Wrestling’s Hold on the Western World before the Great War,” *Historian* 62, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 788.

51. *Dorland’s Illustrated Medical Dictionary*, 30th ed. (Philadelphia: Saunders, 2003), 615.

52. Quoted by Ted Witulski, Manager of USA Wrestling’s National Coaches Education Program in “Wrestling Is Innate,” (Electronic copy accessed 6 November 2005 from <http://www.themat.com/pressbox/pressdetail.asp?aid=10133>).

53. Baugh, 147.

54. Stephen J. Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 89.

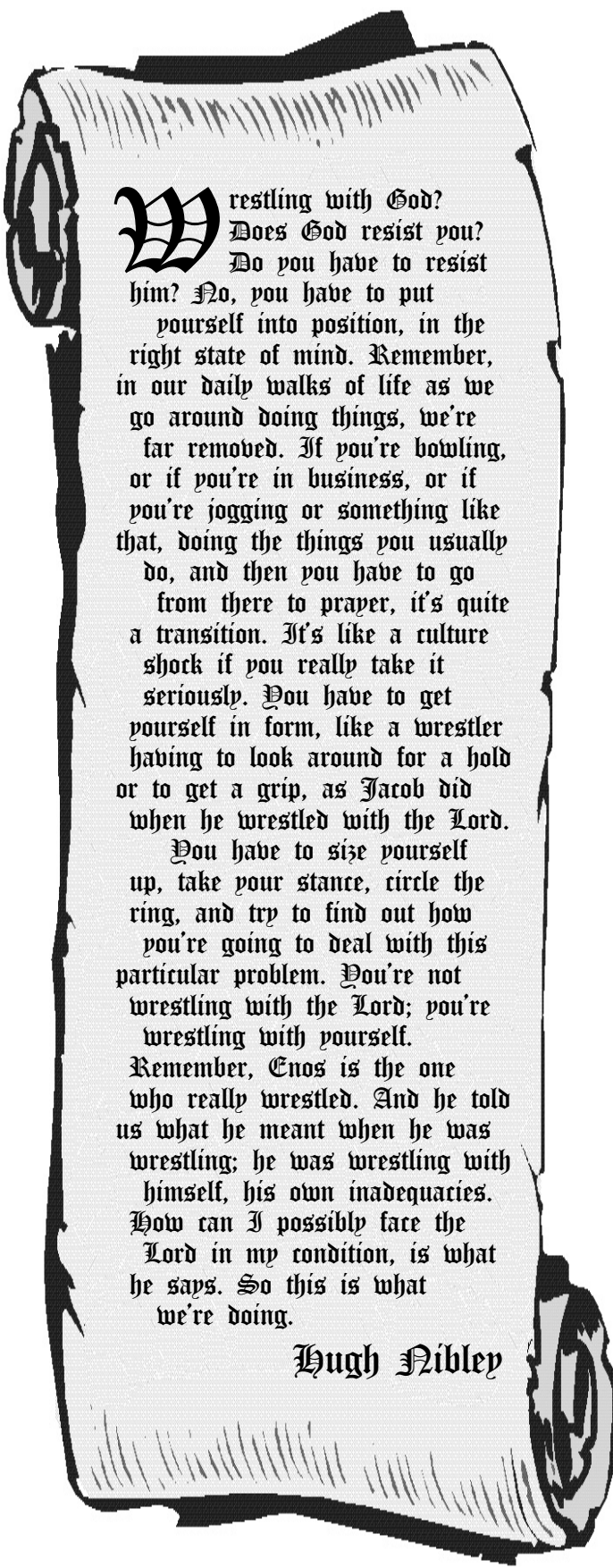
55. Erik Erikson saw animal rituals as powerful metaphors for the “militant nonviolence” of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. He described the stag ritual: “If it should happen that one of the combatants swerves earlier than the other, thus endangering the completely unprotected flank of his rival with the powerful swing of his sharp and heavy equipment, he instantly puts a brake on his premature turn, accelerates his trot, and continues the parallel parade. When both are ready, however, there ensues a full mutual confrontation and powerful but harmless wrestling.” Erik Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 426.

56. Christopher Deacy, “Integration and Rebirth through Confrontation: *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* as Contemporary Religious Parables,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 1 (January 2002): 62.

57. Jacob Santini, “Battery Charge Filed against Leavitt’s Son,” *Salt Lake Tribune* (9 April 2002), B2.

58. Wrestling styles from all over the world can be divided into three basic groups based on the way a competitor wins: offsetting, immobilizing, or submitting. In offsetting styles, one wrestler tries to lift, throw, or push his opponent to the ground or out of a designated area. This style includes sumo wrestlers pushing each other out of the ring, Scandinavian “glima” wrestlers tripping each other, or oiled-up Samoans trying to throw an opponent to the ground without following him down. High school, college, and Olympic wrestling styles are all geared at immobilization—pinning one’s opponent down so he can’t get up. While we in the West pin the two shoulders, other styles have allowed for pinning face down or require the pinning of either both hips and one shoulder, or the reverse. Submission styles are by far the rarest; a win is determined by forcing an opponent to give up. This can be done by choking him or by putting him in a dangerous and painful position—such as an elbow or knee hyperextension. Some styles employ multiple means of victory. In judo, for example, you can win by throwing, pinning, or submitting an opponent.

59. A good example of this attitude comes from the rulebook of the North American Grappling Association (NAGA), one of the largest submission-style wrestle venues in the world. It specifies: “The purpose of a submission is not in-



Wrestling with God?
Does God resist you?
Do you have to resist him? No, you have to put yourself into position, in the right state of mind. Remember, in our daily walks of life as we go around doing things, we’re far removed. If you’re bowling, or if you’re in business, or if you’re jogging or something like that, doing the things you usually do, and then you have to go from there to prayer, it’s quite a transition. It’s like a culture shock if you really take it seriously. You have to get yourself in form, like a wrestler having to look around for a hold or to get a grip, as Jacob did when he wrestled with the Lord. You have to size yourself up, take your stance, circle the ring, and try to find out how you’re going to deal with this particular problem. You’re not wrestling with the Lord; you’re wrestling with yourself. Remember, Enos is the one who really wrestled. And he told us what he meant when he was wrestling; he was wrestling with himself, his own inadequacies. How can I possibly face the Lord in my condition, is what he says. So this is what we’re doing.

Hugh Nibley

Teachings of the Book of Mormon—Semester 2: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990 (Provo: FARMS, 1993), 301

jury but concession. Players must apply holds in such a way as to cause their opponent to submit, but not to instantaneously injure the joint in question. While NAGA recognizes . . . the often hair's breadth of difference in the reasonable application of a hold during a heated contest, the referee will take care to observe the appropriate application of the hold. Explicitly, the referee can disqualify a player, even after he has secured a submission, if the hold causes genuine injury, and was applied recklessly or with malice." (Electronic copy accessed 2 November 2005 from http://www.nagafighter.com/naga_rulebook.html#NAGA%20Contestants).

60. Moyers, 298.

61. Moyers, 299–301.

62. Joseph E. Persico, *Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918* (New York: Random House, 2005), 48–52.

63. I learned this during a tour of Gettysburg.

64. McNamara's interview is included in the Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Fog of War*, Sony Picture Classics, 2004. In a book he co-authored with James G. Blight, McNamara quotes Ralph White on empathy: "Empathy is the great corrective for all forms of war-promoting misperception. It means simply understanding the thoughts and feelings of others. It is distinguished from sympathy, which is defined as feeling with others—as being in agreement with them. Empathy with opponents is therefore psychologically possible even when a conflict is so intense that sympathy is out of the question. We are not talking about warmth or approval, and certainly not about agreeing with, or siding with, but only about realistic understanding." See Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight, *Wilson's Ghost: Reducing the Risk of Conflict, Killing, and Catastrophe in the 21st Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 65.

65. *Ibid.*, 70.

66. Hugh W. Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1978), xvii.

67. Lowell L. Bennion, *The Best of Lowell L. Bennion: Selected Writings 1928–1988*, Eugene England, ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 76.

68. These were all suggested or implied by Ted Witulski in "Wrestling Is Innate." (Electronic copy accessed 6 November 2005 from <http://www.themat.com/pressbox/pressdetail.asp?aid=10133>). In mentioning the downing of Flight 93 on 11 September 1999, Witulski borrowed from a moving tribute written by Rick Reilly, a *Sports Illustrated* columnist. Noting that the four men known to have fought back against the hijackers were all athletes—a high school football star, a former college basketball player, a rugby player, and a national judo champ—Reilly made a poignant observation: "At a time like this, sports are trivial. But what the best athletes can do—keep their composure amid chaos, form a plan when all seems lost and find the guts to carry it out—may be why the Capitol isn't a charcoal pit" (Rick Reilly, "Four of a Kind," *Sports Illustrated* 95, no. 12 (24 September 2001): 94).

69. See www.christianwrestling.com.

70. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harvest Book, 1987), 86–88.

Notes for the Calling and Election sidebar

1. Andrew Skinner, "Jacob: Keeper of Covenants," *Ensign*, March 1998, 56. Skinner writes that Jacob was "ushered into the presence of God, every promise of the past years having been sealed and confirmed upon him" and reiterates that "the story of Jacob's wrestle discloses the ultimate blessing that can be given."

2. Roy W. Doxey, "Accepted of the Lord: The Doctrine of Making Your Calling and Election Sure," *Ensign*, July 1976, 50–53.

3. *Ibid.*, 50.

4. For a thorough study of renaming in ritual and spiritual rebirth, see Truman G. Madsen, "Putting on the Names: A Jewish-Christian Legacy" and Bruce H. Porter and Stephen D. Ricks, "Names in Antiquity: Old, New, and Hidden," both in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 458–81, 501–22.

5. For a comprehensive examination of ritual embraces in ordinance and coronation rites, see Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 241–53. Nibley specifically mentions Jacob's ordeal and explains that the Hebrew word *yeaveq* can be translated as either "wrestle" or "embrace" (243).

6. Victor L. Ludlow wrote: "Placing a hand under the upper leg or thigh of a seated person was a solemn means of concluding an oath or contract, similar to 'shaking hands' on an agreement in our society." See his *Unlocking the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 16.

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Symposium, and for our conversation afterwards. They alerted me to this special aspect of Jacob's injury and also Nibley's description of wrestling as a ritual embrace. My thanks also to another symposium attendee whose name I do not remember for directing my attention toward Joseph Smith's accounts of his First Vision and the struggle that attended that event.

7. There are also at least two other scriptural instances that very likely describe someone having his calling and election made sure—one with Joseph Smith and another with the Brother of Jared. Enos is a possible third example. All four instances (if we include Jacob's) have similar elements that follow a certain pattern: a physical trial (or trials) followed by a divine visitation with an attending promise of exaltation.

In D&C 132, Joseph Smith is directly addressed. He is commended for the great sacrifices he has made and is told, "I am the Lord thy God and will be with thee even unto the end of the world, and through all eternity; for verily I seal upon you your exaltation, and prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father" (verse 49). And this promise is given in the context of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who "have entered into their exaltation, according to the promises, and sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods" (v. 37).

The brother of Jared sought assistance from the Lord in order for his group not to have to cross the ocean in the darkness of sealed vessels. But instead of just kneeling down and demanding a solution, he painstakingly polished sixteen stones until they were clear as glass and then carried them by hand to the top of Mount Shelem, so named "because of its exceeding height" (Ether 3:1). Anyone who has peaked a high mountain knows what a taxing undertaking it is, particularly while carrying two handfuls of stones. By so doing, this prophet did not make it any easier for the Lord to visit him—surely it is as easy for God to visit the bottom of a valley as it is to appear at the top of a mountain—but it was so very much harder for the brother of Jared that it demonstrated his desire and commitment. It showed that he would go as far as he could before asking for help the rest of the way. I find the similarity of this to Jacob's wrestling striking.

Once the brother of Jared communed with the Lord, his faith was great enough that the veil was thinned and he was ultimately granted a full view of Jehovah's body. During this appearance, the Lord tells him, "Because thou knowest these things ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you" (Ether 3:13). It appears that he is receiving his calling and election, and, given this context, it seems significant for our speculations about Jacob's opponent that the experience of having one's calling and election made sure may include a divine visitation.

Enos's story is not as clear, but he does state that the spiritual wrestle he went through came "before I received a remission of my sins" (Enos 1:2). It is at least possible that he is alluding to a visitation and promise of calling and election similar to the experiences of Joseph Smith and the brother of Jared. And, as with the other cases, his redemption comes at the end of a period of great struggling.

8. *Journal of Discourses*, 11:117.

9. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 342–43.

Note for Jacob and Esau sidebar

1. After a year of obsession over this whole story, I finally realized just the week before going to press that it's Isaac's favoritism of Esau over Jacob that has resonated so strongly with me all along. My own mild father—the youngest, smallest, and meekest of two sets of twin boys—seemed always frustrated with me, with my boyhood shyness and sensitivity. But not with my brother Michael, who came three years later. I've become a strong man. But, like my father, I had to develop that strength by winning and losing matches. Mike was just born strong. Strong and wild. Dad loved his spunky son, the son who fought back—who, even as a toddler, threatened to "beat your brains to the moon."

Mike still says and does what he wants while I remain censured by the fear of disappointing our parents. And though I've adopted my father's two great loves—wrestling and writing—I've never caught his eye with either. But Dad swells with wet-eyed pride over his younger, feistier son who's out driving Hummers in Iraq while I sit here guzzling soda at the keyboard.

Jacob's many grapples have become personally revealing to me. My brother and I still wrestle every time we see each other, and it's the same hugging-while-clinching that I see in Jacob and Esau. Yet I've become even more touched by the struggle I imagine Jacob had in trying to earn his father's esteem. He couldn't buy or steal it, despite his efforts. But I hope he ultimately gained it. Decades after their reunion, Jacob and Esau met again to bury their father (Genesis 35:29). I like to imagine that by then, all three men had come to terms with themselves and with each other.



ERIECTION OF THE CROSS BY GUSTAVE DORE

MYTHIC HERO

The prisoner sizzled on the rack
but he never squealed on friends or bemoaned his fate.
The high authorities observed transcendence in his suffering.

Not willing to make a martyr from the wreckage,
they washed away his feces and fudged the past,
doctored every inch of masculinity.

When Romans build their monuments to mayhem,
they erase the souls of all they vanquish.

They designed a package for their sacrificial lamb,
dubbed him virgin boy of virgin bride,

then willfully, heretically, called him God, as if he were a
Greek.

They made him pacifist.

We are talking about a down to earth fighting man and not
some priss

wallowing in asexual purity. He came from simple stock
and simply said get out of my way and let me be.

Let all of us be free for God's sake.

His hands were dirty. Rebellion's not some idle chatter.

I sit and scratch my skin muttering psalms with other
subdued practitioners.

The insides of this church are elegant and rich, but soul dead.

We are losers here, constant losers, wondering why it all goes
wrong year after year.

We perform with melismatic skill and though there's
satisfaction in the singing,

we experience a profound and elemental loss. We experience
dying.

Looking up I see my old comrade in arms nailed to his tree
supposedly atoning

for my sins, my sexual peccadilloes, but this is superficial
cover-up.

The greatest sin in every life and in every history is that we
lost the war.

Our children will be blamed, and blamed eternally.

They've done a job assassinating relevance.

He was a radical with a voice that pierced the night.

You knew exactly what he meant and why he said it.

There were none of those elliptical parables or circular saws
politicians use to twist and turn their rabble.

He drove a spike into the very center of the pus.

Boot the Romans out of Israel! Slap imperial cheeks!

But the authorities got there first and in the vernacular,
they cleaned his clock with batteries of scribes, whirlwind
propagandists.

They did, as they say in the trade, an historical con.

In that extended slaughter, Latin genocide,
wood and wooden products were the weapons of mass
murder.

So many trees were cut down and chopped into crucifixions,
the forests of Galilee, the gardens of Jerusalem,
were razed to their roots.

For two thousand years nothing would grow in Golgotha,
and even now whatever sticks its head above the soil bears
bitter fruit.

Commissars in ermine robes commission bounty hunters,
treasure seekers,

to dig and poke the earth for signs of a once great saint, a
mythic hero,

as if reified sherds and shards, splinters from the original
cross,

could sanitize fraudulent mythologies.

Scratch the veneer of every myth and expose the worms, the
rage, the hidden agendas,

as Cain clobbers Abel for the price of a beer, or worse.

But this one, this one will not succumb to time, or place.

Skin it back and expose the arteries. Soak this corpse in a vat
of acid.

It wants to shine and it wants to shine on me.

The image of this agony rests securely in my craft,

for freedom is and will always be my one indispensable belief.

The war goes on.

Roman soldiers cross the seas in many ships.

Psalms will sing of trembling trees
growing straight and tall in the Galilee.

In Jerusalem, smoldering Jerusalem, Esau still hates Jacob.

—BEN WILENSKY