

"GODFACING" : UP AGAINST THE ULTIMATE ----- ELLIOTT #1764

TWICE-BORN MEN, Harold Begbie's old evangelical classic, considers that the quiddity of human difference is not age or sex or race but rather once/twice-bornness: some folks have been up against the Ultimate, and some haven't--and communication between the two is improbable and necessary. *This thinksheet affirms and illustrates the essential correctness of this conviction, which Willis the evangelical finds obvious and Willis the liberal finds distressing.*

1. The immediate motive for the thinksheet is to present my latest neologism, "Godfacing," a translation of the Hebrew בָּרַחַבְּפָנָי (Peni/uel) in Gn.32.30f: after Godwrestling, Jacob says "I saw God face to face." My gerund "Godfacing" is a high-energy, accurate translation of the Hebrew word, formed on the gerund "Godwrestling," (1) the title of Arthur I. Waskow's 1978 Schocken book, (2) a high-energy, accurate signal for the Hebrew story (Gn.32.22-32), and in particular of the word-name "Israel" (vs.28; p.1: "God/Renamed him and us the Godwrestler"; cf.p.6)...This Jewish sociologist's life--as I and our son Mark have experienced him--has the biblical Godwrestling, Godfacing quality, and the book details the life of the small, rabbleless, rebbeless Jewish circle (*haburah*) that is his life's social center.

2. In the story, Jacob's cowrestler is called a "man," never called anything else: because of later midrash, we say "angel," as in Hos.12.4, a term bridging between Jacob's supposition while fighting and his inference from the "man"'s statement (vs.28) "You have wrestled with God and with men." His conclusion: Without knowing it, I was Godfacing; I was up against the Ultimate, whose name I could not get but who renamed me. Once-born Jacob is now twice-born Jacob-Israel....The Bible center-stages not God-consciousness (a spirituality of interiority) but God-centeredness (a satellite spirituality of loving obedience). Of course we Christians see, in this from-"man"-to-"God" dawning awareness of Jacob, God's invitation, without coercion, to experience Jesus as man-God; my point here, however, is only the gentleness, mysterious ambiguity, openness, freedom to make sense for oneself. I believe that Jewish and Christian communities should practice this, as does Wascow's Fa-brangen (Yiddish "coming together"): Scripture as "voice of God" or as "the distilled wisdom of the Jewish people" or "the same conversation between God and the Jews that we ourselves are engaged in" or--a fourth subgroup--"some of us feel it even more than we hear it--feel it as a wrestle, not a conversation" (4f). We should (2) "grapple with Torah," which is not Bible or Law "but a process," "Teaching, Pointing--God's Pointing toward a faithful path of life."

3. Godcentering, the Bible's major concern, is a minor concern for many contemporary Jews and Christians, some of whom I'd consider more faithful to God than are many Godprattlers--more faithful to the character of God though unfaithful to the word-tradition-witness of God. Only 20% of UCCers grades 5-9 (says Larry Kalp, p. 1, 15Nov83 KYP) "choose 'having God at the center of my life' as the value (among 24 ranked values) they most want" (vs. 44% of the total group from "12 religious groups and the 4-H Extension" (finding of Search Inst. of Minn.). Kalp: This UCCer is "an outward-looking Christian who is service and issue-oriented." (On the taxonomy of Stæng et al, WAYS OF BEING RELIGIOUS, this is #6, the struggle, wrestling, for justice and peace.) Wonderful and dismal. Dead-end for the church, proximates being confused with the Ultimate.