

WRESTLING WITH GOD: STORIES OF INITIATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND SOME ASIAN PARALLELS

Randolf C. Flores*

ABSTRACT

This study will discuss the following Old Testament texts: Gen 32:23-32; Jon 1:17; Tob 6:1-9; and Exod 4:24-26 and will argue that these are about the initiation of a person to do a divine mission. Some parallels from Asia—Epic Gilgamesh, texts from Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Philippine epic, *Biag ni Lam-ang* will also be taken into consideration to shed light on them. It will also present their interpretation as *typoi* of the sacraments of initiations found in early Christian literature and art.

INTRODUCTION

Reacting to Bultmann's demythologization, the French philosopher Ricoeur writes, "myth expresses in terms of the world—that is, of the other world or the second world—the understanding that man [*sic*] has of himself in relation to the foundation of and the limit of his existence."¹ The myth is a symbol that unfolds human beings' "limit of existence" or "limit-situations," to borrow an existentialist term. It is an essential element of meaning which could refer to an objective reality and to the structure of human existence. As mimesis of reality, the myth is capable of proposing a world in which the reader can inhabit and enlarge his or her "ownmost possibilities" or even reconfigure one's reality.²

The aim of this paper is to present some stories from the Old Testament whose literary genre may be that of myth, tale, or legend and discern how they can shed light on our self-understanding as religious beings. In particular, we will be dealing with stories of initiation and their parallels in some Asian texts and see how these can provide a deeper layer of meaning of the practice of Christian initiation as articulated in early Christian literature and art. On this matter, it is worth to quote

* Randolf Flores, SVD is the Dean of Studies at the Divine Word School of Theology, Tagaytay City (Philippines). At DWST he teaches courses on the Bible and Biblical Hebrew. He is a visiting professor of the Old Testament at the Faculty of Religious Studies, University of St. Joseph in Macau, China.

¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. L. S. Mudge (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1980), 60. This essay is first published in the preface to Rudolf Bultmann, *Jésus, mythologie et demythologisation* (Paris: Ed. Du Seuil, 1968).

² For a discussion on Ricoeur's hermeneutics and its implications to biblical interpretation, see my earlier essay, Randolf C. Flores, "Wrestling with the Text: Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics and the Historical-Critical Method in Biblical Exegesis," *Diwa: Studies in Philosophy and Theology* 27 (2002): 136-54.

here a line from that famous paragraph 12 of *Dei Verbum*, now on its fiftieth year: “To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to ‘literary forms.’”³

THE WRESTLING WITH GOD AT THE FORD OF JABBOK (GEN 32:23-32)

The story of Jacob at the ford of Jabbok is centered on the theme of wrestling.⁴ Besides the play on words in Hebrew of the names, יַעֲקֹב (Jacob) and יַבְבֵּק (Jabbok),⁵ and the verb יָאָבַק (he wrestled), the literary structure indicates the same. Previous to this night incident, the main preoccupation of the narrator is the encounter between Jacob and his brother Esau (Gen 32:1-22) which would happen after twenty years (or after four chapters in Genesis), after Jacob has to escape from his brother for stealing both the בְּכֹרָה (birthright) and the בְּרָכָה (blessing).⁶ Esau has hated his brother and even publicly sworn that he is going to kill his brother (cf. 27:41). This long-expected meeting of brothers is full of suspense then. Jacob is said to be “greatly afraid and distressed” (32:8, NRSV). So he prepares a series of gifts to appease Esau, using even the former’s own family as a buffer (32:13-21).

The narrative, however, breaks up at this point, connected only with what it precedes with the temporal indicator, בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא (on that night, vv. 21b, 22a). That same night, Jacob, gets up, and together with his two wives, two servant-girls, and eleven children cross the ford of Jabbok (v. 22). The change of setting—from Mahanaim (v. 2) to Jabbok, and Jacob’s action in this intervening narrative, form a contrastive *inclusio*: “The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping on account of his hip” (v. 31). The story then can stand independently having a plot of its own—from setting to the outcome, with the wrestling scene as the climax. Following Westermann, the narrative has this literary design:

- I. Setting (vv. 23-24)
- II. Attack, a man wrestled with him (v. 25)
- III. Outcome of the fight
 - A. Opponent’s request to let him go (vv. 26a-27a)

³ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (18 November 1965), par. 12, accessed October 12, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

⁴ For this, see John L. McKenzie, “Jacob at Peniel: Gn 32, 24-32,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 71-76, esp. 72.

⁵ Jabbok is identified today as one of the tributaries of the Jordan River in the Transjordan, see *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* 3, s.v. “Jabbok.”

⁶ Note the play on words in Esau’s complaint to his father Isaac: He [Jacob] took away *my birthright* יַבְבֵּק and, behold, now he has taken away *my blessing* [בְּרָכָה]” (27:26).

B. Jacob's counter, condition, request for name (vv. 27b-30a)

C. Opponent refuses name, blesses Jacob (v. 30b)

IV. Jacob names the place (v. 31)

V. Change of setting and etiological explanation (v. 32).⁷

To highlight this incident, the narrator informs that Jacob is left alone (v. 24a). His opponent is described initially as “man” but whom the readers later on understand as אֱלֹהִים (v. 29b; cf. 12:3-5).⁸ The fight lasts long—“until the break of dawn” (עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר) (v. 24)⁹ but produces no clear winner. It is at this point that the mysterious opponent turns out to be the antagonist as he cheats on Jacob” he strikes (נָגַע) on the latter’s hip socket and becomes dislocated.¹⁰ The narrator seems to amuse his readers with Jacob, the trickster, now becoming the tricked; the cheater, the cheated. Jacob nonetheless holds on to the fight, ironically in an honest way; he does not employ similar dirty tactics. The opponent has to beg him to release the former for the day is breaking. In reply, Jacob demands, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me” (32:26b, NRSV). Thus, as Esau has demanded that his father should bless him (27:34,38), so does this younger brother. The opponent does not accede immediately to the request. Instead, he asks Jacob’s name then changes it to “Israel” with an etiological explanation: “for you have wrestled [טָרַח] with God [אֱלֹהִים] and humans and were able” (32:28b). At this point the narrator reveals the identity of the opponent to his readers. Jacob himself is not surprised to hear of the divine revelation but asks the latter’s name instead, as if he has not just wrestled with God. God does not reveal his name but blesses Jacob. At this moment also, Jacob understands the identity of his opponent as he names the place “Peniel” also with an etiological explanation, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (v. 30, NRSV); the narrator plays on the words פְּנִיָּאל (Peniel), אֱלֹהִים (God), and פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים (face to face); and later on פְּנוּאֵל (Panuel), the place where the limping Jacob/Israel crosses over when the sun shines (v. 31). The narrator closes this section with another etiological explanation about Israelites not eating the thigh muscle (בְּגִיד הַנֶּשֶׂה) on the hip socket because of this incident (v. 32).

⁷ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 514.

⁸ The term אֱלֹהִים carries a wide range of meanings. Besides a generic term for “god,” it could also refer to the God of Israel; to all preternatural beings such as “spirits,” “angels,” “demons,” and the like. It is also used metaphorically (cf. Exod 4:16). See *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, s.v. “God (I) אֱלֹהִים.”

⁹ The expression may suggest a long period of time, see Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. J. H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 315.

¹⁰ The qal form of נָגַע means “to touch;” in piel (the intensive form), “to strike;” there are instances though that the qal connotes “to hurt,” e.g. 2 Sam 14:10; see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 9: 203-209.

As it is, the narrative itself is self-contained, with a clear plot rising to a climax. On a closer look however there are lacunae so that not very few readers would describe the story as enigmatic.¹¹ Who is Jacob's nemesis – God? An Angel? Why cannot the divine being win over Jacob? Why should he resort to trickery? Why must the divine being disappear at daybreak? What is the connection between Peniel and Panuel? What is the purpose of this breakaway narrative in the whole story of Jacob?

While the observation of Fishbane is correct as to the literary function of this narrative in the Jacob's Cycle, the mythological elements of the narrative are also obvious.¹² Westermann in fact relegates it to the Elohist Source and proffers the idea that at the heart of the narrative is a common theme in ancient folklore of a man encountering a non-benevolent spirit guarding a river and that to cross that river one must overcome the "river-demon."¹³ That explains why the river-demon is afraid of the light. The suggestion could not explain though why the pious narrator must employ a river-demon genre for his religious saga that concludes with the etiological naming of a sacred place and a holy people. The Hebrew word "Elohim" in some instances do not mean "God" but could refer to a divine being, i.e., angel. Sarna for example thinks that Jacob's opponent is not God but an angel given the previous narrative on the מלאכי אלהים (angels of God) who meet the patriarch at a place which is a מחנה אלהים (the camp of God) and thus named מחנות (dual form, lit. two camps, vv. 1-2).¹⁴ With the previous narrative on the encounter of Jacob with the angels of God in Bethel (28:10-22), it forms an *inclusio*. In those stories, Jacob is alone and the divine encounter happens at night. In Bethel, Jacob is running away from his brother Esau; In Peniel, he is returning to his estranged brother.

In any case, the wrestling with God or an angel is unprecedented in the Hebrew Bible.

The story could be an "echo" of the much earlier and the more popular Epic of Gilgamesh as far as the ancient Near East is concerned.¹⁵ The hero Gilgamesh is endowed with an extraordinary strength but is an arrogant and oppressive king. The gods decide to make another Gilgamesh who will subdue the former. Enkidu is formed from a clay and from the saliva of a goddess making him both human and

¹¹ For this see Stephen A. Geller, "The Struggle at the Jabbok: the Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 14 (1982): 37-60.

¹² One can discern a symmetry in the Jacob Cycle where the divine encounter in Bethel (Gen 28:10-22) corresponds to the divine encounter at the ford of Jabbok (Genesis 32), see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1979), 42; also David W. Cotter, *Genesis, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 209.

¹³ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 515-518.

¹⁴ Cf. Nahum Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 409.

¹⁵ Cf. Esther J. Hamori, "Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Jacob Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130 (2011): 625-42; for the Gilgamesh Epic, see Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

divine. Both men come to a wrestling match. Gilgamesh prevails but the effect of that fight makes him a new person: he stops oppressing his people, begins to perform worthwhile tasks, and even befriend Enkidu.

The theme of physical fight including wrestling with a deity is also not foreign in Greek mythologies. Heracles (Hercules) must wrestle with Antaios, the giant. The latter forces all those who pass by his land to a wrestling match. The giant defeated them all and used their skulls to roof the temple of his father Poseidon. Ironically, Antaios draws his invincible strength from her mother Gaia, Earth. When Heracles challenges him in the ring, he is advised to lift the giant up from the earth in the contest. He does so and the giant weakens and thus is defeated and killed. At another occasion, Heracles wrestles with Thanatos, the god of Death, thus saving a queen's life. In both cases, Heracles' victory transforms the world to be a safer place for humankind to live.¹⁶

The hero facing such kind of trials may remind one of the well-known quote from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (first published in 1949). In the Introduction, Joseph Campbell writes:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.¹⁷

Campbell thinks that most myths follow a common plot of a journey of a hero unfolding in three stages: the call to adventure, the road of trials, and the return to ordinary world; or departure-initiation-return an insight based on Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*.¹⁸ It is not hard to discern a similar pattern with the Jacob's wrestling with God in Peniel. Jacob who earlier on is a fugitive, an aimless wanderer, is called to a task to inaugurate a new nation to be called "Israel" and thus must come to this threshold and prove himself worthy of the task. This initiation of the hero demands the abandonment of the old world that he lived symbolized by superseding that mystical fight and coming out a new man, prepared to commence his God-given mission. Jacob's *metanoia* is illustrated neatly by the narrator moving from the physical to the moral: Jacob comes out from the fight permanently disabled; he receives a name that denotes his mission. In the stories that come later, Jacob, who is Israel now, is a new man. He is no longer obsessed of cheating and lying but is exceedingly generous and reconciliatory. He insists that Esau must accept his gift;

¹⁶ Apollodorus. *The Library*, trans. James George Frazer, Loeb Classical Library vols. 121 & 122 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1921).

¹⁷ See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 23.

¹⁸ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1960).

allows his brother and his caravan to journey ahead of him; and repeatedly calls his brother אֲדֹנָי, “my Lord” (33:8,13,14,15).

It is said that in Tibetan Buddhism the Second Buddha Padmasambhava, who is credited for the spread of Buddhism in Tibet, would wrestle with mountain deities, one by one, mountain by mountain; and once he pins them down and prevails over them, the Second Buddha makes hear his endless lectures—for months, years, even centuries. Then the deities would get sick of the talks and give in: “Okay, I guess the Dharma is useful. Buddhism is helpful.”¹⁹ As in the Jacob story, the deities lose in the game; but unlike in the former, it is the deities who get converted.

It is not surprising then that in some early Christian writings, the metaphor of a mystical wrestling was used to underscore the seriousness and tediousness of the preparation in the reception of the sacraments of initiation, notably baptism. In his *First Instructions to Catechumens*, John Chrysostom, preaching in the late fourth century in Antioch (Syria), tells the candidates that the thirty days of period of preparation for baptism is just like going to a wrestling school, where one learns to defeat the “evil demon.” It is only through wrestling with this evil demon that one can come out prepared for baptism:

So then, in your case these thirty days are like some wrestling school, both for exercise and practice: let us learn from thence already to get the better of that evil demon. For it is to contend with him that we have to strip with him after baptism are we to box and fight. Let us learn from thence already his grip, on what side he is aggressive, on what side he can easily threaten us, in order that, when the contest comes on, we may not feel strange, nor become confused, as seeing new forms of wrestling; but having already practiced them amongst ourselves, and having learnt all his methods, may engage in these forms of wrestling against him with courage.²⁰

INTO THE BOWELS OF THE BIG FISH (JONAH 1:17)

The initiation of the hero may also involve not only a contest of physical strength and stamina but also entrance into a terrifying journey into the world of the unknown, into the underworld, into the belly of the big fish, as in the story of Jonah. A divine-sent דג גדול (big fish) swallows Jonah and the prophet goes בְּקִשְׁי הַדָּג (into bowels of the fish) for three days and three nights. Inside the Sheol, the Underworld, the erstwhile recalcitrant and hard-headed prophet whose Hebrew name *yônāh*^h (dove), is suddenly softened and transformed. He prays: “I called to the YHWH out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my

¹⁹ Robert Thurman, *The Jewel Tree of Tibet: The Enlightenment Engine of Tibetan Buddhism* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2005), 24.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, *First Instructions to Catechumens* 4 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 9: 162-63).

voice” (2:3).²¹ When the big fish vomited Jonah to the dry land, he is a different person. Thus when God commands Jonah for the second time to go to Nineveh to proclaim the message, his quick response is expressed in two verbs of motion: וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּלֶךְ (he got up and walked, 3:3).

In the Bhāgavata, one of the great Puranic texts of Hinduism, Prabyumna who is the reincarnation of Cupid, is born to Krishna and Rukmini.²² The demon Sambara steals the newborn infant and throws him into the sea. A big fish swallows Prabyumna but is caught by fishermen who in turn deliver it to Sambara. The cooks cut open the big fish and are surprised to see a baby alive inside its belly. They entrusted the baby to Sambara’s maidservant Mayavati, Cupid’s wife reincarnation. When Mayavati bathes the baby, he begins to grow up very quickly and becomes a very handsome young man. Many women get attracted to Prabyumna including Mayavati.

The intertextual relationship between the Bhāgavata and the Book of Jonah is difficult to ascertain. They do share nonetheless a thematic affinity—the initiation of a man by being deposited into the underworld, into the bowels of the big fish, to prepare him to a new and much bigger role in the society.

The earliest Christian reference to Jonah is found in what New Testament scholars today call the Q source (in Q 11.16, 29-32)²³ reflected in the two Synoptic Gospels: Matt 12:38-42 and Luke 11:16, 29-32. It is in Matthew that Jesus alludes the “Sign of Jonah” to his passion, death and resurrection: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster [Gk. κήτος] so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth (Matt 12:40, NRSV). The Matthean redaction²⁴ is even imagined by some scholars to reflect the initiation rites in the early Christian practice of baptism: “Has anyone proposed that the sign of Jonah was baptism (as practiced by John and perhaps by Jesus and his

²¹ Jonah’s thanksgiving psalm in chap. 2 is generally regarded as a later addition as it does not fit into the flow of the narrative, e.g. the insertion of a poetry in the narrative that anticipates (thanking God) the effect of Jonah’s prayer for help, cf. Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 182-186. Other scholars however defend the literary integrity of the text, see for example the symmetry of the entire four chapters of Jonah in Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism. Context Method and the Book of Jonah*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 110.

²² The Bhāgavata is claimed to be an oral composition of 3rd cent. B.C.E., its extant version however is dated between 400-1000 C.E., cf. Robert Van Voorst, *Anthology of World’s Scriptures*, 6th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 28. For the English translation of Bhāgavata, see A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam (Bhāgavata Purāṇa)*, Bhaktivedanta Vedabase, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://vedabase.com/en/sb>; the “History of Prabyuma” is in Canto 10, Part 3, Chapter 55.

²³ See James M. Robinson (ed.), *The Sayings of Jesus: The Sayings Gospel Q in English* (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

²⁴ The Matthean version is generally regarded as latest stage in the development of the sign of Jonah tradition, see R. A. Edwards, *The Sign of Jonah in the Theology of the Evangelists and Q*, SBT 18 (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1971), 71-89.

disciples)? If baptism could be compared with Noah's ark (1 Pet 3.18-22) and passing through the Red Sea (1 Cor 10.1-5), why not also with Jonah's experience?"²⁵ Jonah's name, "Dove," would have provided the hint to associate it with the Story of the Flood in Genesis 6–9, another favorite baptism motif in early Christian literature and art. There are intertextual connections between the stories of Jonah and Noah particularly their struggle with the water.²⁶ Among the early Christian writers, Basil the Great pays attention to this typology: Jonah's plunges into the water, then into the bowels of the sea monster and finally comes out alive and renewed—the three days inside the Underworld for him would symbolize the triple immersion of the initiate; the bowels of the big fish is a *typos* of the baptismal font.²⁷ Jonah is also a favorite object of early Christian art. In one sarcophagus in the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua (in the Roman Forum)—the theme of the sculpture is baptism—it depicts a naked Jonah, like the naked Heracles, just spewed out from the belly of the sea monster. This "sign of Jonah" points to the early Christian practice of baptism: the naked candidates enter from the baptismal font and pass again through the watery womb and thus are born again.²⁸

CONQUERING THE BIG FISH (TOBIT 6:1-9)

In the heroic journey in the Book of Tobit, the young man Tobiah is accompanied by angel Raphael and a dog to a collect debt in the faraway land of Media; a debt of ten talents of silver due to his father Tobit. On the first night, Tobiah and company have to encamp by the Tigris River. Then as Tobiah is washing his feet in water, a large fish (ἰχθύς μέγας) suddenly jumped on him and tries to swallow his foot and the hero starts to cry. That the large fish is extraordinary and mythical would explain why the big fish could stay on a shallow part of the river and that it feeds on human flesh something that a simple river fish does not usually behave. The angel Raphael knows the mythical nature of this fish and thus tells Tobiah: "Catch hold of the fish and hang on to it!"²⁹ The Greek text reads: ἐπιλαβοῦ καὶ ἐγκρατῆς τοῦ ἰχθύος γενοῦ and the narrator does not only describe here a simple act of fishing but one that involves a struggle —"to grasp" (ἐπιλαμβάνομαι) and "to be in control" (ἐγκρατής) of the fish.³⁰ The young man (τὸ παιδάριον) does as he is told and he "drew it up on the land" (ἀνήνεγκεν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, he lifted it up from the earth, v. 3). Raphael instructs

²⁵ See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 353n86.

²⁶ See Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Jonah Read Intertextually," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 497-528.

²⁷ Cf. Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 154.

²⁸ Cf. Robin M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 105 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 50-51.

²⁹ English translation of the Book of Tobit including chapter and verse enumeration follow NRSV.

³⁰ The Greek text of Tobit is drawn from Robert J. Littman, *Tobit: The Book of Tobit in Codex Sinaiticus*, Septuagint Commentary Series (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Littman (p. 9) translates, "Take and be in control of the fish."

the young man to cut open the fish, take out its gall, heart, and liver for they are useful as medicine for anyone afflicted by a demon or evil spirit (v. 4).

The nocturnal fight with the mythical fish initiates the young man to adulthood. He is now ready to marry. When the journey then continues, the quest for the ten talents has shifted to Tobiah's quest for a wife (vv. 10-18). The group reaches the house of Raguel in Ectabana who has a daughter named Sarah. The future bride however has remained single because every time she is given in marriage, the night before the wedding, the bridegroom is attacked and killed by a demon called Asmodeus. She has gotten ten dead bridegrooms already. The angel tells Tobiah not to worry; with the big fish's liver and heart, the demon will be repelled. The same fish entrails would be used for healing.

The action of lifting the mythical fish not only from the water but from the earth draws a scene similar, mentioned above, with Heracles who wrestles with Thanatos lifting the latter from Gaia, the Earth.

The pre-nuptial initiation is comparable with one of the oldest oral epics in the Philippine archipelago, the *Biag ni Lam-ang* (Life of Lam-ang), which many believed to have come down first as an oral tale in poetic form in the pre-colonial period (before 1521).³¹ It appears to have been chanted by a singer as a pedagogical entertainment for young men who are being initiated to married life. The hero must embark on a dangerous journey to the Bantay Cangisitan (Mountain of Deep Darkness) to look for his father captured and killed by an enemy tribe. After overcoming an exceptional number of Burican (tattooed enemies), the narrative swifts to a journey in quest of a wife. Lam-ang faces here another series of obstacles one of which is a fight with a mythical creature called Sumarang (literally "one who obstructs the way") who is described by the singer of the tale as "having eyes as big as a plate and a nose as wide as two feet." Victorious, the hero is now ready for courtship and marriage. He goes down to the River Amburayan to perform the pre-nuptial ritual bath of *golgol*.³² Another initiation begins after marriage, this time to prepare Lam-ang to be a father—the hero must go down again to the River Amburayan to battle with a big fish, the river monster Bercacan. The Bercacan swallows the hero. Lam-ang dies but the Bercacan vomits out the hero's bones into the bottom of the River. With the help of an old man,

³¹ The language is Ilocano but it could have been composed first in Tinguian, the language of an indigenous group of the same name in the mountains of Abra, part of what is called today the Cordillera region; for the English text of the *Biag ni Lam-ang*, see Jovita V. Castro, et al. (eds.), *Epics of the Philippines*, Anthology of ASEAN Literature (Quezon City: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1984), 67-106. See also Randolph C. Flores, "Literary Unity and Structure of the Ilocano Epic, *Biag ni Lam-ang*," *Diwa: Studies in Philosophy and Theology* 32 (2007): 25–38.

³² The *golgol* is usually performed as a mourning rite but is also practiced before marriage; an old woman, a priestess, burns the *arutang* (rice straw), mixes with an oil produced on a Friday, utters incantations and prayers and pours the mixture through a coconut shell on the head of the one making the *golgol*.

Marcus the diver; and Lam-ang's two companions, the white rooster and the hairy dog—both of them can talk and possess magical powers—Lam-ang's bones are recovered and restored back to life.

Saint Optatus of Milevis, a fourth century Church Father, once alludes to Tobit in his explanation of baptism, in particular the baptismal font as an “ancient fish fond,” filled with the spirit of the sacred fish which brings about healing and baptism of the baptized, just as Tobit's fish had healing powers and able to exorcise demons.³³

“A BRIDEGROOM OF BLOOD BY CIRCUMCISION” (EXODUS 4:24-26)

Another *crux interpretum* is the short narrative on God's attack on Moses. As Moses' embarks on the crucial journey of his life back to Egypt to face the Pharaoh and free his people, he, his wife Zipporah, and their son spend the night in an unnamed place. Then YHWH comes upon Moses and seeks “to put him to death” (וַיִּבְרַח מוֹשֶׁה מִיַּד יְהוָה [in hiphil form], v. 24). Zipporah thwarts the divine attack by circumcising their son, and “touching his feet” (וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו, v. 25c),³⁴ she says: אֵתָה לִי כִּי תִתֶּן דָּמִים לְמוֹלָה (“Truly, you are a bridegroom of blood to me,” v. 25d NRSV). Moses is saved and Zipporah states, תִּתֶּן דָּמִים לְמוֹלָה (“A bridegroom of blood by circumcision,” v. 26 NRSV).

The Hebrew text is not difficult but the function of the narrative has generated not a few interesting suggestions in the history of its interpretation.³⁵ Why should God seek to kill a person he has just chosen to liberate Israel?³⁶ There is probably a truth to the idea of Wellhausen that circumcision was once a pre-nuptial rite of passage.³⁷ In the Philippines, most young boys until today must undergo the rite of circumcision in order to become men and ready for marriage and be able to sire children. In the olden days, they go down to a river, chew banana leaves while the *magtutuli* (one who performs circumcision) cuts the foreskin after uttering prayers. The *tuli* (the

³³ See Jensen, *Living Water*, 261.

³⁴ The Hebrew is not clear which feet the pronoun “his” is referring to. With the “feet,” Hebrew euphemism of the male genitalia, it makes sense that Zipporah is touching the son's foreskin with Moses' feet, see William Henry Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 219.

³⁵ See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 95-101. See also John T. Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict: The Role of Exodus 4:24-26 in the Book of Exodus*, Bible in History (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

³⁶ The LXX changes the Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH to ἄγγελος (angel). In the Book of Job, the hero Job is also “attacked” by the הַשָּׂטָן (the satan), one of members of the divine assembly but with the permission of YHWH (see Job 1:6–2:10).

³⁷ See Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith 1973), 340; for instance, see Genesis 34 where Shechem has to undergo circumcision prior to his marriage with Dinah. In one Ugaritic text (KTU 1.24), the one who performs the rite of circumcision is also the marriage-broker, see Robert Allan, “Now That Summer's Gone: Understanding QZ in KTU 1.24”, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici sul Vicino Oriente Antico* 16 (1999): 19-25.

circumcised) is now a man; while the *supot* (uncircumcised) is not yet a man and he should not marry even if he is more than forty years old already.

After the narrative of his birth until his call (Exodus 1-4), the narrator makes it a point to present to his readers that Moses must “wrestle with God” like Jacob,³⁸ but in a bloody way. The circumcision of his son becomes his own in a kind of vicarious circumcision.³⁹ This is ritualized by the wife laying his son’s foreskin before Moses’ “feet” (euphemism in Hebrew for the male genitalia). Moses is transformed. He has become the “bridegroom of blood by circumcision.”⁴⁰ As the circumcised bridegroom, he would now become the father not only to his son, but to the whole of the children of Israel who are about to be born as a nation out of the waters of the Reed Sea.

For Augustine, he finds this text less enigmatic than prophetic. The theme of being saved through infant circumcision and vicarious circumcision in Exod 4:24-26 forms the background of his argument in his defense of paedobaptism with the godparents standing in behalf of the child in this sacrament of initiation. He writes:

And this was made manifest by the message of an angel in the case of Moses’ son; for when he was carried by his mother, being yet uncircumcised, it was required, by manifest present peril, that he should be circumcised, and when this was done, the danger of death was removed.... Therefore, when others take the vows for them, that the celebration of the sacrament may be complete in their behalf, it is unquestionably of avail for their dedication to God, because they cannot answer for themselves.⁴¹

SOME CONCLUDING POINTS

1. That the stories of initiation here is Jungian collective unconscious of the “hero with a thousand faces” at work would be stretching too far. A literary pattern is discernible though: a hero who is to be sent for a divine mission or a special task, must “wrestle” with the divine sender the outcome of which is a renewed personhood on the part of the one being sent.

2. What is highlighted in them is the difficulty of the change from one stage to another. The hero arrives at the moment of liminality. Death, blood, and the sojourn into the underworld are a mimesis of this threshold. To reach to the *metanoia*, a

³⁸ Cf. Bernard P. Robinson, “Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus 4:24-6,” *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986): 451-52.

³⁹ In the text, there is no indication that Moses is circumcised and thus the need for this vicarious circumcision; see John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 58-59.

⁴⁰ The expression may also indicate the circumcision of future generations who though Moses’ vicarious circumcision are now identified as belonging to Israel (note the Hebrew plural in לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, literally “to circumcisions”); for this see Serge Frolov, “The Hero as Bloody Bridegroom: On the Meaning and Origin of Exodus 4,26,” *Biblica* 77 (1996): 520-26.

⁴¹ Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 4:32 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series 4:461).

period of great trial, whether in the form wrestling or overcoming a mystical or mythical figure, must be superseded. Jesus' temptation right after his baptism and prior to his public ministry, where the Spirit "forced" him (ἐκβάλλει) to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan for forty days (Mark 1:12-13), is also of this genre. Paul has this in mind too when he relates baptism with death:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:5-4).

3. The "wrestling with God" moment then is as important as its outcome. Perhaps it is not overbearing to say that one can invoke this moment to accentuate the initiation part of the sacraments (from a Catholic perspective), often taken for granted over the effects. Most often the sacraments become a "cheap grace." Would it not be more of a precious grace if the candidates were to go to the "underworld," to wrestle to learn with seriousness the treasures of their faith and of practicing charity on a daily basis before receiving these visible signs of divine presence?

4. It is a limitation of this essay to have focused merely on the journey of the male hero. Some other future studies might want to take a closer look at the bloody sacrifice of the unnamed daughter of the judge Jephthah (Judges 11), who, in behalf of her father, must perform on the mountains the Rite of Lament of the בתולים (vv. 37-38).