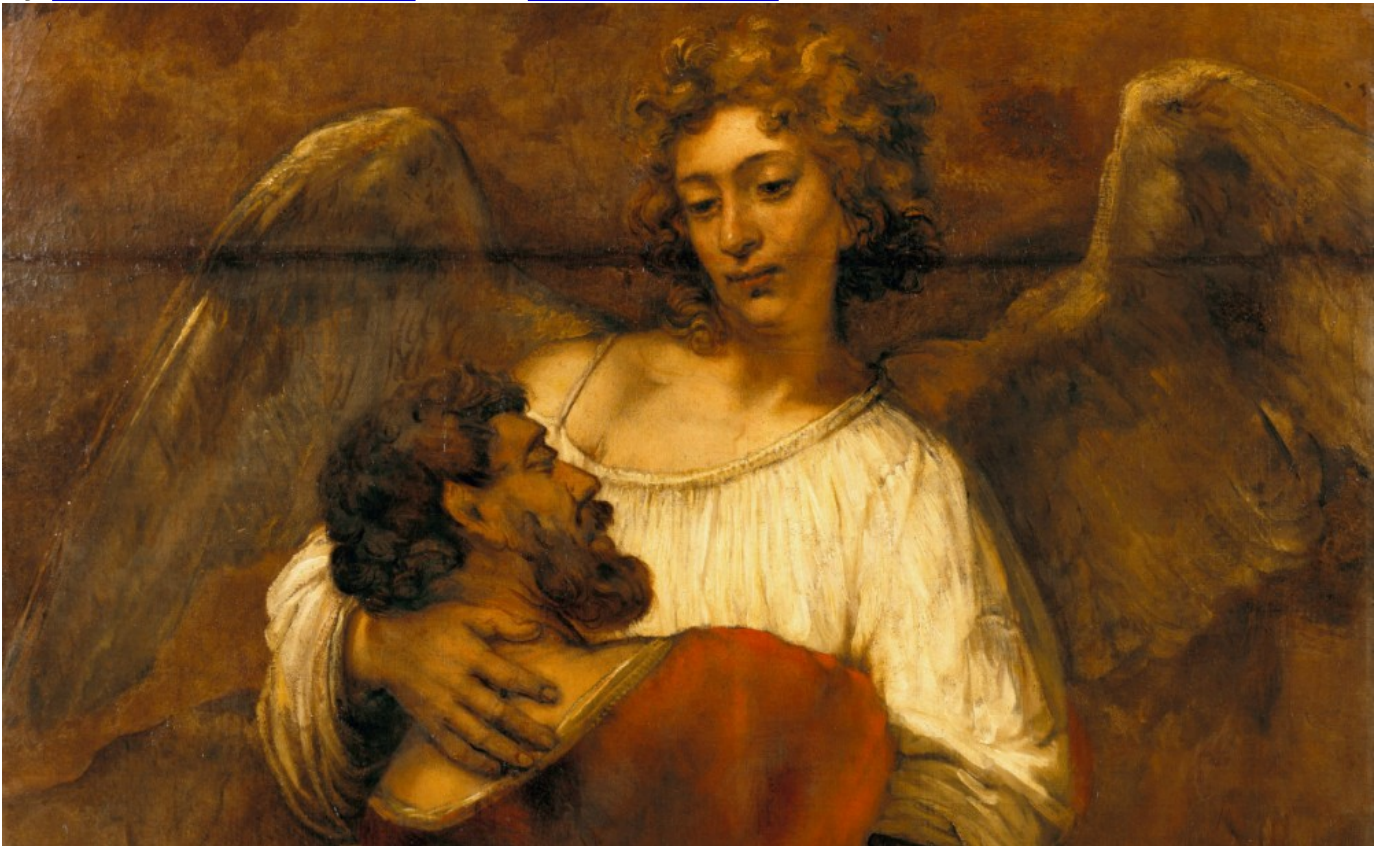


Jacob and the angel, as told by the angel

I'm authorized to open seals, drive the chariot of fire, and pour out bowls of judgment. But wrestling someone?

by [Daniel Mallory Ortberg](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue



Rembrandt van Rijn, detail from [Jacob Wrestling with the Angel](#), oil on canvas, circa 1659.

In the beginning, when I was first making appearances to mortals, most of them died before I could speak the first word of truth. Just from the sight of me—they fell right over. Great burly men and women too, not like the kind you see nowadays. I mean, real antediluvian hulks with chests the size of wine barrels and legs like cedar trunks. Their consciences would seize right up; they were that certain I'd come to find them out. And they'd give up the ghost—practically flung the ghost right at

me—rather than listen to a word of what I had to say.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, and the distribution and installation of wisdom is the task with which all powers and principalities have been charged, not excepting myself. *Fear* being the operative word, and not *panic*, which is why most of us have learned to start each incident log with a command like “Fear not,” or “Dread not,” or “Be thou not dismayed,” or some other variation thereof; most people are full of the beginning of wisdom already, and appearing before them without some form of reassurance is liable to result in total system overload, followed shortly by shutdown.

So I didn’t get much practice speaking for a while. But the help desk agreed that this was through no fault of my own, so I kept getting sent out on jobs until I could find someone who was capable of holding up their end of a conversation.

I didn’t look then like I do now. This was before the great cloud with brightness around it and the fire flashing forth continually, before everyone had settled on having four faces and calf feet and burning coals on their lips. People, I have found, have a very keen eye when it comes to forms that resemble their own, and it’s better to look as different from a person as you possibly can than to try to recreate one of their appearances. You always end up with a little too much of something, or not enough of another, and most people would rather talk to a four-headed chariot than something that looks almost like them but has one too many mouths or eyes that don’t close right.

I am authorized to perform acts of justice, power, and retribution, to deliver messages of comfort and healing. I am also cleared to open wombs, to test the hospitality of human hosts, to drive the chariot of fire, proclaim portentous births, deliver destinies, blind the unbelievers, test the faithful, record deeds in the book of life, feed prophets in the form of either raven or dove, open seals, pour out bowls of judgment, and blow all 12 of the lesser trumpets. I am not authorized to take communion or to deal out death. All the deaths listed in my incident history have been accidents; you can check the tickets. I never wanted to dismay anybody, but people *will* die, no matter how careful you are with them.

The thing about people is that they can only handle a *very* little amount of communion. A bite of flesh and a mouthful of blood and that’s it, and even that you have to couch in multiple layers of explanation and things like “sacramental union”

so they can understand. They live all alone in their own heads, and shudder reflexively at the prospect of God's imminence. I've seen it. I've seen a man spend all his life praying for union with the divine, only to shrink back and scabble to return to his own skin once he realizes that the presence of the divine is coming for him, even though there's nothing to be afraid of, which is why it's my job to remind them not to be afraid. Everything is ultimately reconciled to God, so there's no reason to be afraid of anything. Just relax and wait to be reconciled; active participation is not required. Personally, I have never been without the presence of the grace of God.

I was around for a little while before the world was made, and I liked it fine then. I like it fine now, too. The Spirit of God moved over the waters, and I moved over the waters, too. There was nothing for anybody to be afraid of, because we were all in the dark then. All things invisible and formless moved together, and the heavens were filled with the soft rustling of leathern wings.

Then came order. First the firmament, with little windows to let in the rain, and then the underworld thrust under the pillars of the deep, and the earth in between, and the terrible winds that blew over it, so that nothing could grow. This was fine too, but the making of the world caused a great noise that has not stopped resounding yet, and all of us have had a ringing in our ears ever since. The Voice of God, once heard, is not easily unheard. The sun burned the sky by day, and the moon spoiled the darkness by night. I don't mean to make it sound like I didn't like them, only that it was an adjustment.

I am authorized to deliver messages of comfort, but not to deal out death.

Then came the things that swarm the waters, and the things that creep under the earth. Then came trees. And all of them received blessings. Then came people, most of whom were later drowned. I don't suppose I'm speaking out of order when I say I think it was right they were drowned. I'm merely agreeing with the official decision. These people were fugitives and wanderers, and they drew marks on their foreheads whenever they had done murder, so that everyone who saw them would know and would leave them alone. They promised sevenfold and seventy and sevenfold vengeance, and flung up insane and shivering towers over the plains that threatened to crack heaven. And they lived so long their hearts grew dizzy within them and their thoughts became thoughts of treachery and deceit, and the earth became a smoking furnace. So we drowned them, and all things were made new, and

that was better.

The first one I spoke to who did anything besides drop dead was this woman Hagar. I had not spoken to the man Abraham, but I spoke to her, and I said, “Fear not,” and for some reason this time it worked, because she only looked at me and waited for me to go on. I was so excited that I could hardly remember what came next, which was that God had heard the cries of her son, and that she ought to get up. I didn’t say anything about the well, but the well was there, and she saw it, so I as good as told her about it. She was very happy, and so was Abraham, and Ishmael too, most likely, and eventually all the promises she was given came to pass.

Now they are both dead and united with God. It does not especially matter whether her son died of thirst in the desert or somewhere else later on, because he is united with God now, and when you are with God you have *always* been with God, so it does not matter what has or has not happened to you. I mean, it matters, of course, as all aspects of what has been planned matter, but it does not matter to *you*, or at least that’s what I’ve been given to understand from what I’ve read. But it was nice to make someone as happy as I made the woman Hagar, because I had never made anyone happy before. I had not *intended* to make her happy—please don’t misunderstand. Her happiness was incidental to the task at hand, but I don’t think it was wrong of me to enjoy the results of my work. At all times, whether they live or die, whether humans obey or flee, whether they offer worship or blaspheme, I maintain a strictly professional air. I have never once been reprimanded for how I comport myself under the sun.

I would also like to take the opportunity to clear up a matter that I think has often seemed unclear: we all take turns at being Satan. If you are assigned to oppose, to withstand, to stand up against the people of God, or to level accusations, or to offer temptation or to take possession, you have been assigned to contend against your colleagues, and you take your turn as the Great Adversary with a cheerful spirit and a right good will. Everyone understands this as part of the great work and does not take it personally if we are periodically at odds. Each of us has spent time in outer darkness, and we have always come back in.

I don’t want to talk very much about the other one, the brother to Hagar’s boy, Isaac, who was *not* killed. People are very tiresome about that, and very pleased with themselves for having no stomach for the story, as if they have accomplished something significant by preferring life to death, or for begrudging the things God

asks of them. It is not a new thing, to not wish to die. So they complain, but they do not *listen*, when if they would listen, their suffering would be allayed. And so their suffering continues.

I should add, it was very difficult, in those days, to keep anyone from stretching their sons out on altars and offering them up as burnt sacrifices. I was kept quite busy then. There had been talk of an official demonstration, to remind people that burning sons was not strictly necessary unless explicitly called for and that God did not need to be anticipated. But I've talked about this already more than I meant to. I will confine myself to this: God did not ask of Abraham anything that God was not willing to provide for him.

I had wondered if Abraham might become happy at some point when I spoke to him, as Hagar had become happy, but the incident did not seem likely to repeat itself. I was not disappointed by this, as I was not disappointed when people used to die at the sight of me. I simply logged the event and did my job to the best of my ability. I have never held myself responsible for outcomes.

Since everything is ultimately reconciled to God, there's nothing to be afraid of.

But what I want to talk to you about now is a misunderstanding—I think the only misunderstanding I have ever suffered. I mean what occurred was misunderstood in an *administrative* sense. I do not claim never to have been misunderstood by the recipients of the messages I have delivered. Such a claim would be impossible to verify, and I would not make it. It concerns the man Jacob, and what happened in the place of Mahanaim, when he went there to see his brother, Esau. I had no instructions about what was to take place between the two of them. My concern was strictly with Jacob, and I had no interest in either aiding or hindering reconciliation. It is my understanding that he divided his party into two camps. I have no idea what happened to either of them, as I was never charged with their keeping.

I was sent to wrestle with him until the breaking of the day. I'd never been sent to wrestle anyone before. I'd never been told to touch anyone before, and I'll admit to you that I shuddered a little at the prospect. In my opinion, you can see the blight in them when you get too close. Maybe that's a little superstitious. I don't mind it so much when they're fully dead, you understand. Something that's supposed to be dead, and is dead, that's no surprise, but there's something about a creature that's *going* to be dead but isn't yet, something that *knows* it's going to be dead and

doesn't want to be. I've never liked that. When they're still walking around and looking out of their skulls and you can just see the rot and the grave that's coming, I'll admit that unsettles me, and the thought of getting close enough to wrestle one still living, flush from shoulder to hip—I just didn't like it. Well, they've never liked the look of me either. So I call that fair.

But I had done worse things, and anyhow it was only until the break of day, and then I could discharge my duties and go back. I was sent here to wrestle and to release him; whatever else God had in store for him was none of my business. I didn't say anything—I mean, there's not much point in telling a man to "Fear not" only to lunge at him, is there? Half of me expected him to go trembling all over and die before I could even lay a hand on him. I won't say I hoped for that. I would have been relieved, but I won't say I hoped for that. Even if I don't like what's being asked of me, I've never not wanted to do my job. You can check my incident report history. I resolve everything. If things don't work out on an assignment, it's never been because I left my post or failed to do what was asked of me. So I kept my mouth shut and drove my foot down into his kneecap, and we started wrestling.

God was with him as well as with me, I think, because otherwise I just don't see how a person would be able to stand up against me for so many hours. But he did. If I had had kidneys to bruise, they would have been bruised by the end of that fight. He struck his way in immediately and jabbed the heel of his hand into my throat. That was something that had never happened to me. But that's not to say the man was *winning*, mind you. I hadn't been sent there to lose, so I touched him on the left socket of his hip and shoved the whole thing out of joint. He made quite a sound at that, but it didn't stop him from coming at me for more than a minute. It did look funny, though, the way his leg drooped.

The sun was coming up, and I was supposed to check back in with the help desk once I was finished, so I said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But he didn't let me go. I suppose I sort of wished then for the days when people used to die at the sight of me. No, I don't really mean that; those were disorganized times. But it seemed to me that there ought to have been a balance between everybody keeling over dead at my approach and one of my assignments countermanding a direct request. Either way, no one listens to me, and I don't care for that. It's my job to be listened to, after all. I didn't like that he could keep hold of me either. He didn't seem big enough to be able to do it, but I had to admit he had me caught fast.

“I have striven with God—if you are *not* God, as I suspect, you have at least been sent by God, for there is nothing quite right about you,” Jacob said, “and I have prevailed.” He was breathing quite heavily by then, and I could smell the red in his lungs.

Then he said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” which I’ll admit took me by surprise. Well, I’m not authorized to give blessings like that, and no one had told me to go down and bless him. I was supposed to wrestle with him until the breaking of the day, no more and no less, so I didn’t say anything, and I didn’t let go of him either. If I’m honest, I suppose I didn’t really *want* to bless him at that point. I think I may have been offended.

After a little while had passed, Jacob spoke again. “Please tell me your name.” Well, I hadn’t been authorized to do that either, even though ordinarily I’m cleared to speak the true names of most things, including seven of the most private names of God. But I didn’t believe Jacob had any jurisdiction over me—I still don’t—and so I said nothing. And then he said nothing, and I still said nothing, and he didn’t let me go, and I didn’t let him go, and that went on for quite some time. It grew very tiresome after a while, and he wept and shivered a great deal. Finally he stopped weeping and shivering. I left his body where we had been wrestling, when it was over; presumably he is buried there now, or else in some other place. Ultimately he has been reconciled to God, so there’s no point in speculating what other outcomes may have been possible. God reconciles everybody.

You are probably thinking I must have violated some ordinance, as I am not normally authorized to deal out death. I want to make it very clear that I do not believe I have broken any rules, and no one in my chain of command has ever expressed anything other than satisfaction with my methods. I am not rebellious. If I had overstepped my bounds, someone would have said something. I was not authorized to either kill the man or bless him, and so I did neither. He died because he would not let go of me. It is not my fault that a man cannot prevail against a principality and a power. No man ever has. I keep telling them not to be afraid, and they shouldn’t be, but nobody ever listens to me; I don’t think that’s my fault either. Anyhow, that was all a long time ago now.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “When I wrestled Jacob.” Excerpted from [The Merry Spinster: Tales of Everyday Horror](#), by Mallory Ortberg, published by Henry Holt and Company. Copyright © 2018 by Mallory Ortberg. All rights reserved. CAUTION: Users are warned that the Work appearing

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