

JACOB'S JOURNEY OF VIRTUE: FROM GENESIS 32 TO HYMNOGRAPHY AND PHILOKALIA

Abstract

Chapter 32 of the Book of Genesis, through the dynamic presentation of events from the life of the patriarch Jacob, offers an indirect portrait of him, which Byzantine hymnographers and Philokalic writers perceived and developed, presenting it as a model for believers concerned with progress in virtue through a spiritual reading of Scripture. The following pages aim to highlight precisely this threefold perspective (scriptural, hymnographic, and Philokalic) on the moment of Jacob's return home—upon which he will now receive a new name, Israel—and on the manner in which this return is prepared and unfolds, insofar as the details of these events are relevant to the portrayal of the patriarch Jacob as a model of virtue.



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Introduction

The narrative of Jacob's return home, as chronicled in Scripture, presents a complex journey steeped in personal and spiritual significance. Jacob's sojourn in Mesopotamia is marked by complications that compel him to leave his familial home and seek refuge, driven by maternal concerns for his safety in the wake of familial strife. Initially presented as a quest for a suitable wife, this journey draws deeper scrutiny, as early Church Fathers and spiritual writers reveal layers of meaning regarding Jacob's character and his spiritual evolution. Among these interpreters, Venerable Isaiah the Solitary asserts that Jacob's decision to venture to Mesopotamia is emblematic of his desire for spiritual purity, having consciously chosen not to marry Canaanite women,

whose ways were considered contrary to the values upheld by his ancestors. This decision thus serves as a significant stepping stone in Jacob's development as a figure striving for moral and spiritual excellence.

As Jacob recounts his arduous years with Laban, his words reflect not only labour but also a resolve rooted in faith, with constant reminders of divine protection and providence. His time spent tending Laban's flock and enduring harsh conditions becomes a metaphor for the trials faced by anyone engaged in the pursuit of virtue. The hymnographic interpretations further explore the dual aspects of action and contemplation represented by Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel, suggesting that one must master practical duties before attaining true spiritual insight. Through such multifaceted readings, Jacob emerges as a profound model for all who seek to attain deeper spiritual knowledge and ultimately commune with God, serving as an exemplar of the struggles and growth inherent in the human journey towards divine vision.

From Peniel to Hymnography and Philokalia

Jacob's return home is recounted in Scripture as following a not entirely happy sojourn in Mesopotamia, where he went, being somewhat compelled by his mother, to save his life, under the pretext of choosing a wife from there. These details did not escape the keen eye of those seeking spiritual meanings hidden beneath the veil of the letter of Scripture. Thus, Venerable Isaiah the Solitary, considering Jacob as one of the saints who did not obey sin unto death, but listened to their holy conscience and inherited the heavenly Kingdom, affirms that Jacob "wished to go to Mesopotamia in order to acquire sons from there, because he did not wish to acquire sons from the daughters of the Canaanites, who were contrary to their parents" (Cuv. Isaia Pustnicul 1991, 61). Thus, this decision belongs to Jacob himself, a fact that will play a decisive role in shaping his portrait as a type of the man who labours toward perfection.

Returning to the scriptural text, Jacob himself describes the time spent in Mesopotamia at the house of his father-in-law Laban as follows:

"These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your she-goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flock. What was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I was in your house; I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you changed

my wages ten times. Unless the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed” (Gn 31:38–42).

This period of his life is reread in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete in a characteristically hymnographic key:

“The patriarch endured the heat of the day [...] and suffered the cold of the night, labouring continually to acquire his two wives. By the two wives understand action and contemplation: by Leah, action, as she bore many children; by Rachel, contemplation, which is obtained by much labour. For without labours, O my soul, neither action nor contemplation will be accomplished” (*Triodul* 1986, 363).

The same spiritual interpretation of Jacob's marriages is also found in the above-mentioned Philokalic writer: “Leah is conceived as the image of bodily labours. Rachel is the image of true vision (contemplation).” Pausing briefly on this event and its significance, we observe that the two sisters are given to Jacob successively as wives through deception, not according to his will, a fact with distinct spiritual meaning: unless a person fulfils the whole of praxis (symbolised by marriage to Leah), true contemplation (symbolised by marriage to Rachel) is not granted. It is also significant that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah—Rachel being beautiful, while Leah had weak eyes. Through these words of Scripture, we understand that as long as a person sees with bodily eyes, he does not yet perceive the glory of true contemplation (Cuv. Isaia Pustnicul 1991, 62–3). These are but a few examples from hymnography and Philokalic literature in which the life of the patriarch Jacob, interpreted spiritually, becomes exemplary for all who wish to labour until receiving the true vision of God.

Under the conditions of this harsh life in Mesopotamia, at the Lord's command (Gn 31:3), Jacob gathers his family, his flocks, and all his possessions (Gn 31:18) and resolves to depart for Canaan without informing Laban. Laban pursues him and, having caught up with him, being warned by God in a dream, does him no harm but asks: “Why did you steal my heart and carry off my daughters as though taken captive by the sword? [...] Why did you steal my gods?” (Gn 31:26,30). Within the framework of this final encounter between Laban and Jacob's family, on the threshold of their separation, chapter 32 of Genesis begins.

The chapter opens with the resumption of Jacob's journey toward Canaan. Having just escaped his father-in-law's pursuit and still tensely awaiting his meeting with his brother— from whom he had parted under difficult circumstances—Jacob experiences an angelophany after approximately a week's journey southward, from Gilead toward the Jabbok. The place where **מַחֲנֵיִם** appear to Jacob is named by him **מַחֲנֵיִם** (Mahanaim – “Two Camps”), most probably referring to the two dangers threatening him: pursuit by Laban and confrontation with Esau. Mahanaim thus acquires a particular significance in the history of the Jewish people; it appears as the place that reminds the despairing person that history lies in God's hands. In this respect, the example of King David is most eloquent: he withdrew to Mahanaim during Absalom's rebellion (2 Sm 17:24), and before the battle he writes: “I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill [...] The Lord sustains me [...] Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be upon your people” (Ps 3:4–5b, 8). Thus, for all who view the history of the Old Testament as their own relationship with God, Mahanaim represents the spatial or temporal point at which the awareness of God's presence becomes vital; without it, confronting the multitude and cruelty of adversaries is futile.

In the flow of the biblical text, the way Jacob addresses Esau (**אֲדֹנָי עֵשָׂו ; עֵבֶרְךָ יַעֲקֹב**) was interpreted by Augustine as the non-fulfilment of Isaac's blessing, which declared that Esau would serve Jacob and not the reverse. This historical non-fulfilment shows, in Augustine's view, that the text speaks of a future Jacob—the Church. The younger son received primacy, while the elder—the Jewish people—lost it. Thus, Jacob fulfilled the entire prophecy by gaining dominion over peoples and kingdoms (Augustine 2002, 214).

The spiritual interpretation of Venerable Isaiah, however, is perhaps the most fitting approach to this passage, in which Jacob humbles himself verbally before his brother. He highlights the fact that Jacob seeks to overcome his brother through humility, the virtue before which enmity dissolves: “When a person comes to see the glory of divinity, enmity fears him. Thus, although Esau comes against him with hostility, Jacob's humble mind extinguishes his malice, and he no longer wages war against him, but prostrates himself before God” (Cuv. Isaia Pustnicul 1991, 63–4). Jacob's ultimate motivation is clear: to find favour in his brother's eyes. Yet he also ensures that Esau learns, through messengers, that he has acquired sufficient wealth during his stay in Mesopotamia, indirectly signalling that he lays no claim to the parental inheritance, which may remain

entirely Esau's. Saint John Chrysostom views this sending of messengers as the moment of reconciliation:

“Desiring to appease him, he sends messengers ahead to announce his return, to speak of the wealth he had gained and where he had spent all that time, to soften his heart. And this indeed happened, for God had calmed Esau's heart, extinguished his fury, and pacified him” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1987, 247).

Yet the scriptural text seems to conceal further realities exposed by the Fathers, for Esau is depicted as coming to meet Jacob with four hundred men (Gn 32:6). Whatever Esau's intentions—whether to impress Jacob, demonstrate prosperity and power, or assert supremacy over his younger brother despite the blessing received (Saint John Chrysostom maintains that Esau in fact planned nothing against Jacob; cf. p. 249)—they were in any case suspicious. Under these conditions, Jacob, perplexed, troubled, afraid, “with death before his eyes” (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1987, 247), does not lose his composure but acts pragmatically, dividing all that he possesses into two camps so that at least one might escape. The annotations of the Geneva Bible note the fragility of Jacob's faith, who, despite having been met by angels, nevertheless reveals the weakness of the flesh through fear (*The Bible* 1560, 15).

Verses 10–13 of chapter 32 present Jacob's prayer, in which he invokes the divine name, recalls God's promise, acknowledges God's mercy toward him, and petitions for deliverance and fulfilment of the promises. Analysing these four aspects of the prayer, we observe that Jacob addresses God through His relationship with his forebears (אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק) but ultimately appeals to his own personal relationship with Yahweh (יְהוָה הָאֵלֹהִים אֱלֹהֵי), recalling that his return to Canaan is an act of obedience to the divine command. In other words, the Lord who spoke to him is obliged, as it were, to return His obedient servant safely to the promised land. Jacob acknowledges his unworthiness for the mercies received and for God's faithful fulfilment of His promises, yet on this very basis he asks for two things: deliverance from Esau's hand and the complete fulfilment of the promises. The Masoretic Text (v. 12) suggests that Jacob was less concerned for his own life than for that of his wives and children, using the expression “the crushing of mothers upon children” (אִם עַל-בָּנִים; cf. Hos 10:14), depicting the height of cruelty that might be inflicted upon his family. The expression in verse 13, הִיטֵב אֵיטִיב (“I will surely do you good”),

indicates Jacob's renewed plea for the fulfilment of God's promises, which necessarily include the preservation of his family's life in this seemingly fatal situation.

After this prayer—beautiful and powerful, humble yet bold—Jacob, according to verses 14–22, spends the night in the camp and prepares a gift for his brother, carefully instructing the messengers how to present it to soften Esau's heart. Saint Ambrose of Milan sees in this overnight encampment the acquisition of inner peace and tranquillity, the true fruits of virtue (Ambrose 2002, 216–7). Verse 21 contains two Hebraisms requiring explanation: *אֶכְפֹּרָה פָּנָיו* literally means “I will cover his face,” but may be understood as “I will divert his attention, prevent him from gazing upon the past offence, and thus appease him”; while *שָׂא פָּנָי* literally means “he will lift my face,” that is, he will forgive me. This refers to the act of favourable reception, where the arriving person bows to the ground and the receiver, if favourable, lifts his face. Beyond the wordplay in this verse, it is noteworthy that this is the only place in the chapter where Jacob directly acknowledges his guilt to some degree. The deceitful acquisition of the paternal blessing shows that Jacob, though chosen by God as heir of the promises, is not without sin. Saint Gregory Palamas goes further, stating that no righteous person of the Old Testament is without sin (2013, 544).

C.H. Mackintosh observes:

“whoever observes Jacob's life, after he had surreptitiously obtained his father's blessing, will perceive that he enjoyed very little worldly felicity. His brother purposed to murder him, to avoid which he was forced to flee from his father's house; his uncle Laban deceived him, as he had deceived his father, and treated him with great rigor; after a servitude of twenty-one years, he was obliged to leave him in a clandestine manner, and not without danger of being brought back, or murdered by his enraged brother; no sooner were these fears over, than he experienced the baseness of his son Reuben, in defiling his bed; he had next to bewail the treachery and cruelty of Simeon and Levi towards the Shechemites; then he had to feel the loss of his beloved wife; he was next imposed upon by his own sons, and had to lament the supposed untimely end of Joseph; and, to complete all, he was forced by famine to go into Egypt, and there died in a strange land. So just, wonderful, and instructive are all the ways of providence.” (1880, 276–7).

Yet a fully spiritual perspective on Jacob's life, which does not overlook the fact that he is a type of Christ, reveals that these trials are not punishments for deception but

acts of obedience and submission to the divine plan, prefiguring Christ's own obedience in humility (cf. Lk 22:41–44).

After sending his wives and children across the Jabbok (vv. 23–24), Jacob reaches the climax of his expectation: the struggle with the Enigmatic Person that guarantees his deliverance in meeting his brother. Verse 25 notes that Jacob remains לְבַדּוֹ—alone, or “on his own side,” in solitude. In contrast with the vision of the divine camp in verse 2, we observe that while God's messengers may be encountered along our path, the revelation of God Himself requires withdrawal from the world, as seen also in the experiences of Moses (Ex 19:3) and the Apostle Paul (Gal 1:17; 2 Cor 12:2). The struggle is described using the verb אָבַק, related to אֶבֶק (“dust”; Gesenius 1915, 7), suggesting either a dust-raising struggle or close combat. Its imperfect form (אֶבֶק) echoes the name of the river Jabbok. As for the identity of the Enigmatic Person, Hosea 12:4–5 states that Jacob struggled with God, clarifying that he struggled with an angel. The Geneva Bible notes that Jacob wrestled with God in the form of a man (*The Bible* 1560, 15). Jacob himself is convinced that he has wrestled with God (v. 31).

Jacob, who in Ambrose's allegorical interpretation represents the model of the person striving for virtue (Ambrose 2002, 218–9), does not yield until dawn. He is struck in the hip socket and asked to let his Adversary go. Jacob's reply is linguistically striking: “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” Yet the verbal form בֵּרַכְתָּנִי suggests rather: “I will let you go only if you have blessed me first.”

Regarding the change of Jacob's name to Israel, the Hebrew text allows two readings: (1) “you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed,” or (2) “you have struggled with God, and you will prevail with men.” The second, though less popular, is preferable, being more logical and supported by the LXX and patristic authors (e.g. Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1987, 248). Venerable Isaiah interprets this change spiritually as proof of Jacob's strengthening in virtue:

“He was called Jacob because he trampled the enmity of the passions until he was deemed worthy of blessing and regained his senses, which were under the enemy's control. When these were freed, he was called Israel, that is, the mind that sees God” (Cuv. Isaia Pustnicul 1991, 63).

Finally, attention is drawn to Israel's naming of the place Peniel—“the face of God”—for “I have seen God face to face, and my life has been preserved.” Through the

struggle, name change, and blessing, Israel is assured of deliverance from Esau. Father Dumitru Stăniloae, following Isaiah the Solitary, notes that through this struggle Jacob acquires humility, which aids him in meeting his brother: “Jacob is strong through humility. By this he overcomes Esau’s hostility, that is, his passions” (Cuv. Isaia Pustnicul 1991, 64, n. 87).

Since the episode of Jacob’s wrestling with God has most profoundly shaped his image in collective memory, we conclude with a contemporary interpretation synthesising the patristic and hymnographic tradition. In the Old Testament we see the Patriarch Jacob first as one who occupies himself with praxis, striving to show himself faithful to the Lord to obtain His blessing. Jacob wrestled all night with God. He knew that to be able to face his brother Esau, who was coming against him to kill him, he needed the Lord’s blessing—a blessing stronger than the very death that threatened him. Toward morning, Jacob succeeded in entering the presence of God and heard His voice, saying to him: “Because you have been strong with God, you will be strong also with men.” At that very moment he also received a new name—Israel—which is interpreted as “the mind that sees God,” thus passing from praxis to contemplation. Through its eternal value, Jacob’s struggle with God became an example worthy of being followed by all those who wish to draw near to the Lord and to acquire His grace.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jacob’s journey back home unfolds as a profound narrative rich in spiritual lessons, illustrating the transformative struggle between the human soul and divine will. Through Jacob’s experiences in Mesopotamia, we witness not only the trials of a patriarch but also the embodiment of spiritual diligence and the quest for perfection. His marriages to Leah and Rachel symbolize the essential balance between action and contemplation, emphasizing that personal labour is a prerequisite for attaining true vision and understanding.

Jacob’s prayer during his return reveals a deep reliance on God and a recognition of his own limitations, underscoring the necessity of humility in approaching divine grace. The encounter with Esau serves as a culmination of Jacob’s transformation, where his humility dispels enmity, illustrating that reconciliation and forgiveness are achieved through a heart attuned to God’s presence.

The wrestling match at Peniel represents the peak of Jacob’s spiritual development, as he grapples not only with his physical adversaries but also with his internal struggles.

This event marks his transition from the name Jacob, associated with deceit, to Israel, denoting one who has contended with God. The narrative invites reflection on the nature of faith, perseverance, and the goal of divine encounter—truth that resonates through generations, encouraging all believers to pursue a deeper relationship with God and to embrace their own struggles on the path to spiritual fulfillment.

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