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EDITORIAL

Rev. **IOAN CHIRILĂ**

Patriarchs – a Type of Man open to the Seeing of God

Patriarchs – a Type of Man open to the Seeing of God

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Philo of Alexandria presents the lives of the biblical patriarchs as paradigms of human behaviour, whose stories exemplify upward movement and the conformity of the personal will with the divine will. This process of spiritual ascension is illustrated by the multitude of lessons drawn from the lives of these biblical figures, exemplifying man's constant effort to achieve spiritual harmony and communion with the divine. A central aspect of Philo's philosophy is anticipated in the title "the wise soul (the wise soul!) desires only the true good". This motto essentializes the spiritual ideal proposed by Philo, suggesting a synthesis between human desire and the ideal binomial of truth and good, an objective that transcends the material dimension and guides the wise soul towards a deeper understanding of the world and the divine. In this sense, Abraham becomes a paradigmatic example: in the face of conflict and injustice, he fights not only to save his relative, Lot, but also to protect the divine translated into just action, being supported and protected by God.

Through the concept of "nephesh haya", Philo of Alexandria explores the spiritual and moral dimension of the soul, proposing that the true essence of humanity is fulfilled through the Law, perceived as a manifestation of the Logos and divine order. This philosophical framework conveys a biblical anthropology that suggests that man can find his place and balance in the universe only through an authentic and continuous commitment to divine values and eternal morality. The result is a rich discourse that explores the complexity of the relationship between the human and the divine, with faith as the main instrument of knowledge and spiritual integration. The language and expressions used by Philo seem to be rooted in a tradition close to Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, with ascetic and patristic accents that explore the doctrine of uncreated energies. These energies are conceived as the means through which God interacts with His

creation without confusing Himself with it in a pantheistic way. The parallels we can draw between Philo's thinking and later ideas in Christian theology are fascinating, reflecting a common quest to understand the divine and its manifestations in the world. However, Philo, a contemporary of Jesus Christ, did not interact directly with Him because of the distance separating him from Palestine, where Jesus lived, having settled in Alexandria.

Philo discusses the concept of "seeing God" through the "eyes of the soul," a vision that transcends sensory perception and emphasizes the soul's capacity to access higher spiritual dimensions. He exemplifies this idea through the story of Abraham, whose ability to "see" the divine is a catalyst for authentic happiness and deep fulfilment. Divine vision is not just a passive experience, but has concrete and transformative consequences: Abraham, through this spiritual vision, restructures his will, aligning himself with the divine will. This alignment leads Abraham to exercise his role as leader with a responsibility that transcends ordinary worldly authority. Instead of tyranny, his rule becomes one of guidance and protection, guided by the divine principles he internalized through this vision of God, which sets a model for those who wish to readjust their lives in accordance with the divine will. Thus, Philo provides a link between his philosophical and theological perspective on the role of man in relation to the divine, attempting to describe a synthesis between rational thought and lived spiritual experience. In his analysis, Philo identifies Abraham as an example of authentic submission to God, in which the patriarch's personal will becomes a model of alignment with divine desires. Abraham, far from being confused with any absolute dimension of divinity, nevertheless remains a symbol of human wisdom seeking to integrate itself into the cosmic order orchestrated by God.

Philo emphasizes that humanity is engaged in a perpetual lesson of approaching God, a spiritual journey aimed at approaching our vision of the divine. In this regard, Philo begins with Adam and follows a narrative thread that includes biblical figures such as Enos—the first to call on the name of YHWH—Enoch, and Noah, culminating in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Enos, whose name means "man," represents a central symbol of humanity and is described as embodying constant hope in God. From Abraham and his descendants, Philo arrives at the concept of "Law," which represents not just a simple collection of divine rules, but a guide to the divine incarnation in the lives of people. By actively seeking God's vision, humanity can reach a perfect incarnation, a goal fulfilled in the one for whom the Law becomes an integral part of his existence.

This search for spiritual vision is presented by Philo not as an end but as a process of transformation, in which the law manifests itself to achieve a deeper communion with the divine, ultimately leading to a model of a complete and balanced spiritual life in harmony with the divine will.

In Philo's thought, the divine illumination of the soul opens the way to a profound meditation on the fundamental essences represented by a trinomial: God, Being, and Lord. This symbolic structure invites broad reflection on divine concepts, emphasizing their interconnection and relevance to the human soul. The study of these relationships allows for a deeper understanding of the promise made to Abraham, through which he becomes a source of blessing for people. This motive transcends national and cultural boundaries. Philo emphasizes the universal dimension of salvation, presenting a messianic vision that gives this trinomial an exceptional spiritual depth. The term "Lord" is evocative, being perceived not only as evidence of Jewish humility in avoiding the pronunciation of the tetragrammaton, but also as a reflection of the soul's desire to detach itself from material values, from "false wealth" and from "external things". This detachment suggests a search for spiritual authenticity, in which the individual aspires to focus on the divine will and its manifestation in his life. The threefold vision thus becomes a frame of reference for meditation, an invitation to better understand the connection between divinity and humanity, as part of a larger whole in the search for salvation. In this way, Philo's discourse outlines a complex relationship between the soul and the divine, highlighting the transcendent purpose of human existence.

From Philo's perspective, it is evident that, despite Platonic influences and Jewish customary traditions, his message is firmly anchored in the idea of universal salvation. This vision emphasizes that God's salvation is not reserved exclusively for a small group but extends to all humanity. Philo portrays the patriarchs as exceptional representatives, precursors of grace, who experienced divine intervention and God's revelation in creation, emphasizing the divine perfection that guides them. In this context, the patriarchs become examples to follow, typologies of the man capable of contemplating God. They illustrate humanity's spiritual quest, demonstrating that it is possible to reach a state of superior happiness. This happiness is considered higher than that experienced by Abraham or Moses, suggesting a broader vision of the Law and divine revelation. Philo thus emphasizes that the supreme ideal is the vision of the incarnate law, of Christ, who becomes the culmination of the human desire for communion with the divine. This vision opens the way not only to a deeper understanding of the relationship between

man and God but also to the possibility that every individual can aspire to a fulfilled and meaningful existence based on divine revelation. In this way, his discourse becomes a profound meditation on the nature of salvation as a universal experience.

The studies included in this volume were mainly presented at an international biblical conference dedicated to the Biblical Patriarchs and their theological implications in the Old and New Testaments. The conference was organized in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) on May 27, 2025, in the framework of the ROOTS project, organized by Rev. Ioan Chirilă, professor of Old Testament at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, "Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca.

ORTHODOX EXEGESIS

Patriarchs – Biblical Typologies for "Malkut Yahwe"

Abstract

The study explores the concept of the Kingdom of God, emphasizing the fundamental role of the biblical patriarchs in this theological narrative. These patriarchs are not just historical figures, but symbols of faith, virtue, and the relationship between the divine and the human, shaping the spiritual ideals of believers. The research analyzes how the Savior Jesus Christ, through his preaching, emphasizes the presence of the Kingdom of God in people's lives, inviting a profound inner transformation. The study also examines Philo of Alexandria's contribution to the typological interpretation of the patriarchs, highlighting the deep connections between the Old and New Testaments. These connections are further illustrated in Christianity by comparing the sacrifice of Isaac with the messianic sacrifice of Christ and by exploring the eschatological contents of divine revelation. Through a detailed analysis of patriarchal figures, this study aims to integrate anthropological and theological perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these characters not only influence contemporary faith but also enrich individuals' relationships with the divine. Patriarchs, therefore, become models of spiritual conduct, inviting believers to aspire to the ideals of the heavenly kingdom in their daily lives.

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Keywords

Patriarchs, Kingdom of God, Typology, Sacrifice, Faith

Introduction

The present research aims to explore not only the emblematic characters of the Old Testament but also their theological, anthropological, and eschatological

dimensions, thus illuminating the close connection between them and the concept of the Kingdom of God. The biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, are not just symbolic figures or historical figures, but spiritual prototypes that continue to inspire and influence contemporary faith. They embody the essential ideals and values that are fundamental to the relationship between humanity and divinity, serving as a bridge between the scriptural past and the spiritual present.

A fundamental aspect of this study is the knowledge and interpretation of the concept of Malkut Yahweh, which is not limited to an abstract spiritual reality but applies to the daily life of believers. In the Old Testament, the image of the Kingdom of God is often associated with the idea of promise, covenant, and fulfillment, and the patriarchs serve as examples of faith and obedience to the divine will. These patriarchs symbolize the concrete manifestations of divine provision in history and thus become subjects of a typological interpretation, offering profound readings of religious traditions. In the New Testament, the Savior Jesus Christ begins his sermon by proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom and inviting us to open our souls to receive this divine reality. Jesus connects Abraham's destiny with the model he wants to build through his teachings. He often uses historical examples and figures from the Old Testament to emphasize the continuity of the divine message.

Also, the interpretation of the patriarchs is not limited to the Jewish tradition. Still, it continues in Christian thought, where figures such as Abraham are cited in the epistles of the apostles, including Saint Paul, to illustrate the fundamental principles of faith, justification, and salvation (Hârlăoanu 2007: 193-210). This continuity not only enriches our understanding of Scripture but also invites us to reexamine our own spiritual beliefs and commitments. Philo of Alexandria, a major thinker of the first synthesis between the Jewish and Greek traditions, brings an innovative dimension to the analysis of the patriarchs. His typological interpretations emphasize the sacramental nature of the relationship between God and humans, illustrating how these characters become symbols of essential virtues. With profound theological acuity, Philo uses triadic structures to emphasize the connection between humans and God, significantly shaping later thought in both Judaism and Christianity.

In this study, we aim to examine these themes through a multidimensional lens, exploring how the religious traditions of the patriarchs create a framework for spiritual election, calling, and fulfillment. We will also examine the anthropological implications of the consecration of the patriarchs, as their example of faith and devotion helps us to

shape spiritual ideals in our own lives. This research will not only address the historical side of the scriptures but also explore the deep foundations of spirituality, connect them to the contemporary context, and encourage reflection on faith practices, considering these traditions. In doing so, we will discover how the biblical patriarchs, highlighting a theological and spiritual continuity, offer us not only historical examples of virtue but also living models of spiritual engagement. This understanding will lead to a better appreciation of the diversity and complexity of religious realities, opening doors to interfaith dialogue and facilitating a deeper anchoring in the shared values of faith.

Throughout this study, we will focus on analyzing the common denominators between the typologies of patriarchs and "Malkut Yahweh". We will explore the details of Abraham's connection with God, emphasizing his unwavering faith, humility, and devotion, and highlighting how these traits contribute to the building of a chosen spiritual community. We will also invest time examining the role of Isaac, whose purity and obedience to the divine will prefigure the ultimate sacrifice brought by Christ.

We aim to integrate the anthropological perspective on the figures of the patriarchs, which gives us not only an understanding of each patriarch's personality but also insight into how they influenced the lives of future generations. This will include a discussion of the spiritual leadership and responsibility that the patriarchs had not only towards their families but also towards the nations that descended from them, examining the impact they had on the development of Israelite history and, by extension, the world. The patriarchs, through their lives and faith, thus become not only successors of an ancient tradition, but also key actors in the fulfillment of divine promises. Through them, the emphasis falls on the idea that everyone has a role to play within the larger divine plan, a theme that runs not only through the ancient texts but also through the daily lives of contemporary believers. In conclusion, our study will provide a detailed examination of how the biblical patriarchs not only illustrated the Kingdom of God in ancient times but also how these typologies can take on a profound and contemporary significance for our faith today. Thus, our challenge is not only to understand the past, but to live in the present with a deeper awareness of the role each of us has within the Kingdom of God, giving life and meaning to the ancestral teachings.

The Triadological Pattern of the Biblical Patriarchs

When we approach topics related to the biblical patriarchs, our attention usually turns to the three: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are not only central figures of the

Old Testament but also have a significant presence in the writings of the New Testament (St Ambrose the Great 2007, 343-70). An interesting aspect to explore is the way these patriarchs are evoked in the epistles of the Apostle Paul. Paul often mentions them as examples of faith and obedience, using their lives and deeds to illustrate profound theological themes. For example, Abraham is frequently invoked as a model of faith in that he believed in God's promises before they were concretely manifested. The apostle emphasizes the importance of faith for justification, presenting the story of Abraham as the foundation for understanding salvation through faith in Christ (Pașca-Tușa 2018-2019: 9-17; Reit 2010: 33-46). Isaac and Jacob are also brought into discussion as part of the spiritual and genealogical heritage through which the line of divine promises continues. By analyzing Saint Paul's interpretations, we can discern that these patriarchs are not only historical figures but also spiritual typologies relevant to the Christian message. They become symbols of Malkut Yahwe (the Kingdom of God) and of messianism, demonstrating the continuity between the Old and New Covenants.

On the other hand, in Alexandrian Judaism, Philo, at about the same time as Saint Paul, explores the lives of the biblical patriarchs, giving them a typological/symbolic meaning within the divine plan of salvation. A notable example can be found in his interpretation of the Genesis 22 episode, in which Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Philo suggests that Abraham can be seen as a typological expression of God the Father. This parallel between Abraham and God the Father emphasizes the final act of sacrifice, in which love and obedience to the divine will are taken to the extreme. In addition, Philo brings new perspectives on biblical figures, considering them not just historical characters, but archetypes of human virtues. Thus, Abraham becomes a symbol of faith and devotion, being perceived as a model of spiritual and moral conduct for future generations. Through these interpretations, Philo not only expands the spiritual understanding of the sacred writings but also paves the way for a typological understanding of Scripture, influencing not only Jewish thought but also the development of Christian theology (Chirilă 2002, 169-70).

The second Patriarch, Isaac, the son of Abraham, who is offered as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah, represents a profound typological expression for the Son of God, Christ, that is, the Messiah (St. Ephrem the Syrian 2014: 130-137). This parallel is significant because both Isaac and Christ are presented as supreme offerings, symbolizing devotion and obedience to God. In this context, Isaac becomes a precursor of the messianic sacrifice, emphasizing essential themes such as sacrifice and salvation

(Pașca-Tușa 2021: 62-76; Pașca-Tușa 2023, 33-44). Therefore, the typological interpretation of this episode in Genesis allows for a profound and varied reading, unfolding on two levels: on the one hand, the Jewish interpretation that emphasizes the spiritual and moral values of the patriarch, and on the other hand, the Christological reading, which brings to the forefront the anticipation of the coming of Christ.

In scriptural interpretation, we observe that the two previous typological expressions, referring to Abraham and Isaac, are echoed in the third expression, which emphasizes the presence of the Holy Spirit. This becomes evident in our interpretative equation, especially when we introduce the notion of anastasis, which is deeply linked to the concept of resurrection, or the bringing back to life of Isaac in the context of the sacrifice (Pașca-Tușa and Vidican-Manci 2021: 150-64). This idea is closely linked to the act of creation, in which God breathes the Spirit of life into man, according to Genesis 2:7. It is the moment when the human being becomes a "living soul," and this divine act of inspiration symbolizes not only the beginning of physical life, but also a profound spiritual potential. At the same time, the notion of life acquired in the act of resurrection acquires significant relevance, especially when we think about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Savior not only brings new life through his sacrifice but also restores the connection between man and the Creator, thus providing spiritual restoration. In prophetic literature, this theme is developed by prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, who perform miracles that foreshadow the power of the resurrection. The prophet Ezekiel also gives us visions of dry bones coming to life, symbolizing the restoration of the people of Israel, but also an allusion to the resurrection from the dead. This anastatic teaching reaches its peak in the New Testament, where the resurrection of Christ becomes the savior for all humanity. Christ is the "firstborn from the dead," and through his resurrection, God offers us the hope of eternal life. Thus, from the act of creation to the final resurrection, we can observe how the Holy Spirit acts as an agent of life, connecting these fundamental moments of salvation history, as is the case with the sacrifice of Isaac. This continuity between the Old and New Testaments enriches our theological understanding and divine revelation, inviting us to a more profound familiarity with the sacred mystery of existence and salvation.

The Choice and Calling of Abraham – from Typology to the Kingdom

The typological interpretation of biblical figures offers profound insight into how the lives and actions of these characters can be seen as prototypes for spiritual ideals.

Philo of Alexandria uses a series of titles for the patriarch Abraham, emphasizing the diversity and depth of his spiritual character. In his treatise on Abraham, Philo calls him "father," "chosen," "righteous," and "symbol." These titles emphasize his role as a spiritual father, chosen one, and symbol of faith. Furthermore, Abraham is described as "teacher of virtue" and "wise," as well as "lover of God." Through these titles, Philo presents Abraham not only as a historical figure but also as a spiritual teacher and an example of a life lived in accordance with the divine will. In this way, Abraham is presented as a model or paradigm for believers who aspire to grow in Godlikeness, putting on virtues and living them concretely in their daily lives. Therefore, when discussing these typological realities, it is essential to go beyond the literal level of the text by exploring the deeper connections between biblical narratives and their spiritual meanings. Only in this way can we discover the wealth of hidden teachings and more subtle messages that emerge from these sacred texts. Abraham, a central figure in Philo's exegesis, serves as a parable for believers, demonstrating how virtue, wisdom, and devotion to God can guide anyone on the path to spiritual growth (Philo D'Alexandrie 1966).

Typology not only clarifies biblical messages but also inspires a practical application of these teachings in everyday life, leading to personal transfiguration and a deeper likeness to the divine. Furthermore, the auditory experience of the word of God is essential not only for its understanding but also for active participation in the sacred narrative. When someone hears the account of a biblical event, it is not just a matter of receiving the words but of a deep immersion in the narrative. The listener becomes an integral part of this story, feeling the spiritual echo of the events described. Through this auditory involvement, the person can perceive and understand the transcendent contents of the divine message, which often remain undetectable by other means. This process transforms the listener into an active participant in the work of the Holy Spirit. As the individual connects to these transcendent contents, he can actively engage in their manifestation. Listening thus becomes a means by which one not only begins to understand the message deeply, but also to live it and apply it, becoming an actor in the process of divine revelation. Interaction with the auditory message of the holy word changes the listener, engaging him in a dynamic dialogue with the sacred and transforming him into a vessel of spiritual inspiration and action.

In the spiritual interpretation of biblical typologies, the type is not just an external model but becomes a way of embodying a way of living and interacting with the divine. This way offers a deep and personal encounter with God, as described in the

Old Testament. When we listen to the word and call of God, as the patriarch Abraham did, we do not just receive information; we are invited into a continuous revelation that involves us personally and spiritually. Through the example of the patriarchs, we are offered divine lessons that guide us from confusion to spiritual clarity. This experience is not just passive; it invites us to become our own teachers, to learn and form ourselves through both understanding and application. As we undertake this inner journey, seeking to understand and apply divine revelations, we come to gain wisdom. This wisdom allows us to return to the environment of divine discovery with a clearer consciousness and greater confidence in God's presence and closeness. Through this spiritual journey, our purpose becomes clear: we do not simply seek to understand the divine will, but to live in a constant awareness that what awaits us is the Kingdom of God. Each step toward understanding and wisdom is a step closer to this reality, where faith is strengthened by the personal knowledge that the divine is not only near but active in our lives. This spiritual journey thus becomes not just an exploration of religion, but a living, continuously evolving personal experience that transforms us internally and spiritually.

The connection between Abraham and the Kingdom of God is essential in a typological and theological analysis. Jean Daniélou, a leading theologian and exegete, has addressed this issue with a special emphasis on the typology of the Old Testament (Daniélou 1950: 131-5; Daniélou 1949: 66-70), suggesting that, to deeply understand the concept of Malkut Yahweh (the Kingdom of God), it is necessary to relate to the call and election of Abraham. The election of Abraham, which takes place in Genesis 12, is a defining moment not only for biblical history but also for the theology of election (Jinga 2019, 137-60; Jinga 2023, 143-56). God calls Abraham and makes great promises to him, establishing a covenant relationship that will guide the chosen people. This choice is essential because it is not just an individual choice but opens the way for the entire people of Israel and, implicitly, for all of humanity. Abraham becomes a symbol of faith and submission to the divine will, providing a clear trajectory towards understanding the Kingdom of God (Neaga 1957: 193-204).

Rev. Prof. Dumitru Abrudan's study on choice and responsibility emphasizes not only the aspect of choice itself, but also the moral and spiritual implications of this choice (Abrudan 1997: 71-8). Abraham is chosen not for his personal merits, but out of pure divine grace, and this choice comes with the responsibility to live in accordance with the will of God. Throughout his life, Abraham is enlightened, strengthened in

faith, and taught by God, which shows the dynamics of his relationship with the divine. The covenant, a central concept in Abraham's relationship with God, is marked by signs and rituals, such as circumcision, which symbolize belonging to the chosen people. This covenant gives Abraham not only identity, but also a faith doubled by responsibility: that of transmitting these values and teachings to future generations. Abraham's faith thus becomes an example of total obedience to the word of God, the basis for a close relationship with divinity. Abraham's spiritual evolution, through his encounters with God and the continuous confirmation of divine promises, leads him to an unshakable faith that becomes a model for all who seek to understand and live in the reality of the Kingdom of God. The life of Abraham, therefore, represents an essential path for approaching profound spirituality (St. Maximus the Confessor 1983, 145) and the responsibility that membership in the divine Kingdom entails.

Abraham is considered by the Holy Apostle Paul as a model of faith, an example of unwavering trust in divine promises (Buga 1978: 193-204). Throughout the biblical narrative, God promises Abraham numerous posterity, detailing this commitment several times, starting with Genesis 12:3 and continuing in chapters 15, 17, and 18. These promises are not just historical enigmas, but clear signs of the divine covenant, which offers Abraham the status of founder of a great nation and source of blessing for all nations. This aspect of universal blessing is crucial in understanding its role in salvation history (Tarnavschi 1902; Cârstoiu 2008; Popa 2010, 277-88). Theologians and exegetes emphasize that to understand the Kingdom of God fully, it is essential to interpret these texts beyond their immediate historical values. It is necessary to discover the perennial contents and elements of prophetic proclamation in the narrative. This implies an eschatological openness, in which readers must recognize the respect for future promises and the outline of a spiritual reality that transcends simple history. Abraham thus becomes a key figure in this eschatological landscape, symbolizing not only the beginning of a chosen people, but also the beginning of a path that leads to a universal Kingdom, including for all nations (Chirilă 2010, 47-53). This exposition of faith, illustrated through the life of Abraham, becomes a guide for those who seek to align themselves with the divine will and live according to the principles of the Kingdom of God, in view of the great blessing promised to all peoples. Thus, Abraham continues to be an example of faith and a symbol of the divine covenant within Scripture, having an essential impact on contemporary theological teaching.

Patriarchs – spiritual guides to the Kingdom of Heaven

The word of divine revelation has a mission intended to guide us in the history of salvation and to give us wisdom in the search for spiritual truth. This revelation is at the same time a providential event, a divine action that leads us to a better understanding of God's will. Through it, we are urged to discover the mystery of the Kingdom of God, a reality that is often inaccessible but essential for our faith. To understand these concepts, it is helpful to turn to the Gospel of Luke, especially chapter 11, verse 28, where the Kingdom of God is mentioned, and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are mentioned. These patriarchs are remembered not only as historical figures but as symbols of faith and the divine covenant, representing the profound bond between God and his chosen people. Also, in this context, the prophets who carried the message of faith are highlighted. God is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, emphasizing the continuity of the covenant and divine promises throughout the generations (Ionică 2015: 227-41). This designation is not accidental; it reaffirms God's identity as present in the history of Israel and in its plan of salvation. This biblical revelation helps us connect not only with the past but also with the present, giving us an understanding of how God continues to interact with humanity. Thus, divine revelation becomes an essential key to opening doors to a deeper understanding of his kingdom and the promises it contains.

In the Book of Acts of the Apostles, especially in chapters 3 and 7, we observe how the Apostles resort to the figure of the patriarchs to emphasize the continuity of the divine message and the covenant. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are evoked as essential symbols of faith and fidelity to God, representing the three ancestors of a chosen people. This patriarchal trinity is fundamental in Jewish and Christian theology, emphasizing the connection between the past and the present, between divine promises and their fulfillment in history. Philo of Alexandria brings an interesting perspective to the interpretation of these figures. He does not limit himself to a historical analysis of the three patriarchs, but explores the concept of the triad, proposing the idea that, in addition to historical realism, there is another dimension that we must consider. This suggests not only a narrative structure, but a spiritual and metaphysical deepening of the meaning. Philo highlights the importance of interpreting not only from the perspective of personal-historical realism but also of discovering the profound content of the spiritual messages, the elements of spiritual teaching found in the life and actions of the patriarchs (Chirilă 2002, 157-70). This approach encourages us to seek deeper meanings, to be inspired by the spiritual legacy left by these patriarchs, and to integrate

their teachings into our contemporary lives. Thus, each biblical figure becomes a vector of revelation, helping us better understand the divine nature and our relationship with God. This invitation to look beyond the surface is what makes the biblical narrative relevant and alive, generating ongoing reflection on faith and spirituality.

Philo emphasizes the importance of a first triad in the Old Testament, consisting of Enos, Enoch, and Noah, before discussing the more well-known triad of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Chirilă 2002, 162-4). These patriarchs symbolize not only divine continuity, but also a model of spiritual behavior that illustrates living in accordance with the word of God. Enoch is a special example, being known for "pleasing God" and for being taken to heaven without knowing death, which speaks to us of a profound communion with divinity. This narrative is essential for understanding the foundation of the Kingdom of God as revealed in the Old Testament. The concept of the Kingdom is not just a static theme, but a dynamic horizon in which the fulfillment of divine promises is realized. It is an idea that runs through the entire biblical writing, weaving history with theology, so that each figure, whether patriarchal or prophetic, becomes part of a larger divine plan. A valuable theological resource on this topic is the setting of the covenant in relation to the typology and history of Joseph. This character is not only a protagonist in the biblical narrative, but also a symbol of suffering, perseverance, and the pivot between the Old and New Testaments. Throughout his life, Joseph illustrates the theme of the covenant, in which suffering and trials are transformed into blessings and deliverance not only for him but also for his entire family and, implicitly, for the people of Israel. This exploration of fundamental themes in the Old Testament, with an emphasis on the connection between the patriarchs, the covenant, and the Kingdom of God, provides a complex and profound framework for understanding biblical spirituality, opening the way for continued reflection on faith and divine revelation (Baba 2007: 15-29).

Patriarch Joseph is often considered a typological reality, an anticipation of the person of the Savior Jesus Christ. From a biblical perspective, the event in Dothan, where Joseph is sold to his brothers, is a decisive moment that prefigures the suffering and betrayal that Christ will experience in his life (Pașca-Tușa 2018: 229-47). This connection between Joseph and Christ becomes evident in how Joseph's life illustrates themes such as suffering, justice, and forgiveness, all essential to the work of salvation brought by the Savior. In addition, through the figure of Joseph, one can also observe the image of the emperor (Agignoaei 2021: 66-75). Joseph, through his ascension from a position of humility in Egypt to the authority of vice king, becomes a symbol of royalty

and the fulfillment of the divine plan of salvation (St. Ambrose the Great 2007, 301-42). This metamorphosis emphasizes the idea that God works through human instruments, manifesting his will in history through the chosen ones. Joseph is not just a protagonist of a biblical narrative; he fulfills a crucial role in the salvation of his people, acting as a mediator between God and Israel. In this light, it is evident that biblical figures such as Joseph and Abraham are not just historical figures but also represent spiritual models that point to a higher reality: the Kingdom of God. Thus, through Joseph, a comprehensive vision of divine work in the world is outlined, showing how God fulfills his promises through his chosen ones and historical events. This profound perspective invites us to reflect on how faith and salvation are interconnected within biblical history.

From the perspective of the two triads, as interpreted by Philo, a theological continuity emerges that was taken up and adapted in the early Christian environment. Philo, through his typological analysis, brought to the fore the idea that the patriarchs are not just historical figures, but models of virtue and faith that can guide the behavior and spiritual beliefs of believers. This approach was taken up by prominent theologians such as St. Ambrose of Milan, who dedicated works to discussing James as an example of a happy and virtuous life. St. Ambrose considers James to provide a role model, emphasizing the importance of spiritual cleansing and purity as essential objectives in the life of a believer. The entrustment of James into the hands of God becomes a symbol of the desire to cling to divinity and to conform to the divine will. This intimate relationship leads James to aspire to a more profound knowledge of God, transforming him into an example of devotion and spiritual search (St. Ambrose the Great 2007, 243-300). In addition to Ambrose, the writings of other theologians, such as Hippolytus and Tertullian, reflect the same interpretation of the patriarchs, emphasizing the same themes of the encounter with the divinity, confirming that the figure of James, as well as the other patriarchs, remains relevant for Christian teaching. These thinkers highlight not only James' personal history, but also his impact on the spiritual formation of believers, inspiring them to direct their attention and will towards the fulfillment of God's plan in their lives. Thus, James becomes a symbol of the continuous search for divinity and personal transformation, inspiring and guiding entire generations of believers.

The Kingdom of God as the Kingdom of the "Father"

In discussing the patriarchs, it is essential to emphasize their "father" dimension, exemplifying the role of a family's father, a nation's father, or a tribe's father. This familial

image is deeply connected to the concept of the Kingdom of God. When we refer to the Kingdom of God, we inevitably think of God as our Father who is in Heaven. This aspect highlights a connection between the people who assume a role of spiritual leadership and the divinity itself, showing that the patriarchal ministry has an echo in the relationship between God and his people. Throughout his threefold ministry, the Savior Jesus Christ brings a profound dimension to the Fatherhood of God. A significant example is the moment when the disciples ask him to teach them to pray, and Christ responds with the famous prayer of the "Our Father." This prayer is not just a formula of invocation, but a profound declaration of our relationship with God, in which we recognize "your kingdom." This mention denotes not only a submission to the divine will but also an anticipation of what is to come, namely the Kingdom of God. Christ uses this model of prayer to outline not only a personal relationship with God, but also a collective understanding of the divine mission to transform and fulfill human life in its royal dimension. This prayer reaches deep levels of revelation, not only as a biblical quote, but also as an eschatological direction, warning that the coming of the Kingdom will manifest itself in the life of the believer on earth. Therefore, the prayer urges us to a concretization of living in the Kingdom of God, which is not just a foretaste, but a living experience. This brings forward the prophetic perspective on the coming of Christ, who is himself the incarnation of the Word, and, through this, calls us not only to await the coming of the Kingdom of God but also to live in accordance with its values and principles actively. This dynamic relationship among the patriarchs, God as Father, and Christ as Savior offers a way to understand what it means to be part of this Kingdom.

In the framework of my research, I will also recall the interpretation of the Lord's Prayer inspired by the teachings of Saint Justin Popovich, a profound thinker in the Orthodox theological tradition. This interpretation reflects not only the liturgical specificity of the prayer but also interesting correspondences within patristic thought, demonstrating how prayer is connected to the spiritual experience of believers. Philo, in his analysis, suggests the existence of two triads, which leads us to a similar observation in the structure of the Lord's Prayer: two groups of requests that share the essence of our desires and cries to God. This structuring into triads helps us understand how each petition relates to a deeper theme, taking spiritual needs into account. The seven effective petitions in the prayer can be interpreted not only from a theological perspective but also sociologically, that is, in the context of relationships between people and the community. In addition, from the perspective of restoration theology, this

prayer brings us towards connection with the divine, existentially uniting our desires with the grace and mercy of God. The Lord's Prayer is also a gateway to unity and communion with God, offering the opportunity to experience his presence directly. It reiterates the importance of God in our lives and our call to live in accordance with his will. A cultic interpretation of prayer helps us connect more deeply with the sacraments and rituals of the church, highlighting how they facilitate our spiritual relationship with the divinity. This relationship develops through the work of the Holy Spirit, who acts as a mediator between the Kingdom of God and us. Thus, prayer is not a simple form of communication but becomes an act of interaction with the divine. This dynamic process allows believers to feel and experience, along with their callings, the power of God in the world. As a result, the Lord's Prayer becomes an essential tool for opening our hearts and inviting God to work in our lives, guiding us towards a deeper companionship with Him and with others. This profound experience of the divine presence is what underlines the sacramental nature of prayer in the religious life of the Christian.

In our research, anthropological content plays an essential role, as the patriarchal realities of the Old Testament extend beyond their historical status. These figures, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, Moses, and King David, present us not only examples of external faith but also a profound exploration of the inner man. Each of these patriarchs represents a link between human experiences and divine vocation, offering a complex understanding of human nature and its relationship with God. The moment we enter the New Testament; the Savior Jesus Christ begins his preaching by proclaiming the Kingdom of God. This vision is not limited to a distant spiritual reality but affirms that the kingdom is present even in our souls. Jesus suggests that the seed of the Kingdom of God must bear fruit from within, emphasizing the importance of inner transformation as the foundation of faith. This focus on the inner man, on the inner life, connects patriarchal realities with the teachings of Christ, which highlight examples of personal transformation and devotion to the divine will. When we extend this discussion to include other biblical figures, such as Noah and Moses, we see how each of them contributes to a covenant theology. Moses, with his mission to lead the people of Israel to freedom, and David, whose covenant with God profoundly impacts biblical history, bring an additional dimension to our study. The house of David becomes a symbol of divine promise and messianic expectation, and Jerusalem, as the center of this theology, becomes a sacred space, combining historical and spiritual aspects. The prophet Ezekiel contributes significantly to this understanding through his vision of the heavenly

Jerusalem, offering an eschatological perspective that goes beyond the natural. Thus, Jerusalem is not only a geographical reality, but also a symbol of the divine kingdom that will manifest itself in its fullness in the future. This duality of the city, as a physical and spiritual place, reflects the eternal ideals of the Kingdom of God, representing both the history of the chosen people and the fulfillment of divine promises, through faith and personal relationship with God.

Conclusions

Therefore, the biblical patriarchs emerge as exemplary models that illustrate this fulfillment of faith. Each of them, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, offers us a concrete example of virtue, devotion, and responsibility. They are not just story characters, but prototypes that reflect divine ideals and guide us in our quest to live a virtuous life. Therefore, through the prism of these patriarchs, we can identify the essential qualities that a "father," a spiritual leader, should possess.

The responsibilities of a patriarch include not only leadership but also the ability to inspire and shape the communities in which they operate. They must demonstrate courage, promote justice, and be examples of authentic faith. In this sense, the vision of Malkut Yahveh and the patriarchal teachings combine to outline an ideal of spiritual leadership that extends beyond authority to guidance, education, and support for those around them. This synthesis becomes a fundamental key to understanding how all of this contributes to the realization of the divine plan of salvation in the world.

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The Meeting Between Abram and Melchizedek: From Bread and Wine to Peace Treaty

Abstract

This study examines the pivotal meeting between Abram and Melchizedek (Gn 14:18–21) within the broader narrative of conflict and resolution. Using a synchronic literary approach, the analysis traces the emergence of the motif of bread and wine from their encounter and situates it within the context of ancient Israelite society. The symbolic roles of bread and wine are examined in mediating relationships between adversaries and in their broader cultural meanings. The argument demonstrates how this episode both concludes the narrative sequence and contributes to the literary construction of Abraham as the founding figure of the Israelite nation.

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Keywords

Bread and Wine, Encounters between Adversaries, Synchronic Approach, Abram and Melchizedek.

Introduction

The Bible describes meetings between people for various reasons—family reunions between brothers (Gn 33:4; Ex 2:8, 4:27), marriage arrangements (Gn 24:17, 21:10), and social gatherings among shepherds and warriors (Gn 26:20; 2 Sm 2:13). Encounters may be random (Ex 2:17, 11:2) or intentional (Gn 38:16, Ex 5:1, 1 Sm 16:20, 2 Sm 13:8). The focus here is a deliberate meeting between two rival political groups, where the central motif is the serving of wine and bread.

In biblical texts, "bread and wine" typically appears in this order, signifying covenants (Gn 14:18) or gestures of welcome and peace (1 Sm 10:3, 16:20). These are positive symbols during feasts (Ps 104:15, Eccl 9:7, 1 Chr 12:41). Conversely,

overindulgence in bread and wine symbolizes theft or excess (Hos 9:4; Prv 4:17; Eccl 10:19; Neh 5:15). "Wine and bread" appear only twice (Eccl 14:15), indicating joy, while its use in Josh 9:4 suggests deceit (Avishur 1972, 17-81).

Frame Story: Genesis 14:1–24

The narrative describes political rivals outside Israel, with Abram drawn into the conflict due to his relationship with Lot, a resident of Sodom. It ends with an implicit agreement between the parties. The meeting between Melchizedek and Abram occurs within a broader context of adversarial confrontations that culminate in this encounter. Melchizedek presents bread and wine as part of the agreement. Typically, the weaker party offers such gifts to the stronger or victorious side, a gesture loaded with cultural and social meaning. The broader narrative is connected to the motif of the bread and wine offering, and literary devices are used to provide insights into biblical Israelite society. The story is linked to the establishment of Abram, the patriarch of the Israelites.

In Genesis 14:1–24, the rivals are the kings of Sodom [1]. This narrative aligns with the broader theme of land inheritance (Gn 13–15), which involves territorial agreements with adversaries. For instance, Lot's and Abram's shepherds dispute grazing land (Gn 13:7), stemming from economic and agricultural reasons. However, Abram and Lot are not the direct parties (Gn 13:8). These interwoven stories illustrate the land boundaries promised to Abram and his descendants (Gn 13:14–17), stretching from Egypt to Aram (Gn 12:10, 14:15). Genesis 14 contains four connected stories: the battle between northern kings and those from Sodom (vv. 1–16); Abram's rescue of Lot (vv. 10–16); Abram's treaty with the king of Sodom (vv. 17, 21–24); and the story of the treaty with Melchizedek, king of Salem (vv. 18–20). Continuous editing encourages comparison. Therefore, the story of Abram and Melchizedek (vv. 17–24) is treated as a distinct episode [2].

The war between the kings is linked to Lot's captivity through verse 11, which describes how the kings of the alliance of Chedorlaomer stole Sodom's property, including food. A war refugee [3] reports to Abram [4] at Mamre [5] about his nephew Lot (13a). Verse 13b mentions a covenant between Abram and the Amorites, as well as between Eshkol and Aner—likely Amorite kings involved in the defense agreement with Sodom, as Abram's nephew lives in their city. Verses 12–13 emphasize the word "my brother," (אָחִי), possibly highlighting a covenant among equals or settlements of similar political status. Eshkol and Aner might also refer to individuals or regions [6].

Comparing "equal" (שָׁוֶה – v. 5) to the brotherhood in "we are brothers" (13:8) reveals a nuanced political landscape. Abram has a covenant with outsiders, but his relationship with Lot is ambiguous. The text may compare the relationship between Lot and Abram to that between the kings and Abram, possibly alluding to a parallel between the other houses of David and Saul, and the houses of Lot and Abram [7].

Abram decides to rescue Lot with the help of 318 apprentices from his household, suggesting these individuals were trained in his home. Abram pursues Lot's captors as far as Dan, a northern location described as the pursuit's western edge. In v. 15, Abram reaches Obah, west of Damascus [8]. The reference to Dan is puzzling, as the tribe did not yet exist and would later settle in the north [9]. To highlight the contrast between the kings' battle in Sodom and Abram's pursuit (v. 6), the narrative emphasizes Abram's journey to the far north, almost to the region from which the kings originated (vv. 14–15).

Abram saves Lot, his property, the women, and the people, in a graded order indicating their importance (v. 16). War usually mentions the most important person captured at the beginning and again at the end when returned (1 Sm 4:11), whether an object or person, in very personal matters. The author may expect the reader to be impressed by Abram's heroism in saving so many people and property, including the honor of Sodom, and wonders if he will do the same in the future for his nephew and for strangers. If so, the author strengthens Abram as a hero willing to sacrifice for family and strangers to save them from humiliation and death. However, this event may place Abram on equal footing with the people of Sodom, legitimizing Abram and his role for the people of Israel in the future [10]. This may signal the continuation of the narrative: the establishment of a covenant with the kings of Sodom and the meeting with Melchizedek, all part of a deeper story hinted at by the narrator.

The Story in Genesis 14:18–21

The brief story unfolds in three verses and features two central characters: Abram and Melchizedek, along with background participants. It highlights social statuses, including kings, free people such as Lot and Abram's servants, and slaves. Abram and Melchizedek, priests of the Most High God, are chosen by their respective deities. God chooses Abram, while Melchizedek is a priest of the Highest God; however, the nature of the god is not clearly identified.

Valley of Shaveh, or the King's Valley, serves as the setting (Gn 14:17). Following the war, the Amorite kings defeated the alliance of Chedorlaomer. The King of Sodom welcomes Abram to *the Valley of Shaveh* [11]. The concept of "equal" (*Shaveh* – שוה), parallel to "Kings' Valley", reappears here, emphasizing Abram's status among the Amorite kings as an equal [12]. This echoes Abram's earlier acceptance into the group of kings at Mamre in the Hebron area (13:18). Abram is now a full member of the kingly group. While the narrative does not imply a specific alliance with the Amorites, Lot's wealth causes the people of Sodom to rely on Abram, who watches over Lot as his heir. Abram saves Lot, acting as a protector. Lot returns to Sodom, while Abram remains with Bela, the king of Sodom, his ally. The repeated mention of Valley of Shaveh—the King's Valley—emphasizes Abram's greatness in the eyes of his allies and the Amorite kings. Politically and economically, given the famine before his descent into Egypt, this alliance is crucial: each party can provide for the other. Sodom offers property and residence, while Abram brings livestock and military strength. The narrative presents Abram as a reasonable family man who maintains alliances.

The main story recounts the covenant with Melchizedek in three verses (14:18–20), dividing the meeting with the king of Sodom into two parts [13]: the initial meeting upon Abram's return from war (v. 17), the encounter with Melchizedek (vv. 18–20), and the king of Sodom's return in v. 21, requesting the return of his people.

Verse 17 connects to the preceding story (vv. 10–16), introducing King Salem and his covenant with Abram (v. 18). Melchizedek's origins are vague, as he is not mentioned earlier. Identified as the king of Salem—often equated with Jerusalem—Melchizedek embodies justice [14]. His name, Melchizedek, highlights the king's justice, either personal or divine. He is also described as a priest of the Highest God (El Elyon), though it is unclear which god this refers to [15]. The repeated mention of "Tzedek," "Valley of Shaveh," "king," and "El Elyon" (vv. 18, 19, 20, 22) emphasizes justice, equality, kingship, and divinity, suggesting a sense of wholeness [16]. The author's goal is to unite and reinforce these concepts, using linguistic (EL-High 'אל-על') repetition to clarify the message. The phrase "God Most High, Purchaser of heaven and earth" (vv. 19, 22) indicates God's sovereignty and protection, connecting the narrative to God's covenant with Abram regarding land inheritance (Gn 13 and 15). This association extends to the priesthood in Jerusalem's temple [17].

The mention of Dan in v. 14, where a platform for God existed (2 Chr 30:5), suggests the centralization of worship—a theme attributed to later periods of unified

worship in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8:10, Ez 44:15, Neh 10:40, 12:47). The story hints at struggles between tribes, particularly Dan and Judah [18].

Melchizedek serves as a witness to the covenant between the Amorite kings and Abram. The narrative presents Abram as an ally of Melchizedek, despite their apparent differences—Melchizedek being a foreigner and Abram being a Hebrew. This agreement legitimizes Abram as the father of the nation and supports the future priesthood and temple service. Melchizedek acts as God's messenger, reflecting the covenants made by God with Abram (13:14–18, 15:4–8) [19]. The chapter portrays Abram as the redeemer of captives, foreshadowing his role as savior of the future nation, even though Israel does not yet exist. The story encompasses another group—the Amorites—in covenant with Abram, whom he also saves, suggesting shared fate and ancient foreign roots for Jerusalem (Ez 16:3). This contrasts with the Amorites' later antagonism toward the Israelites (Nm 21:34, Dt 1:7). The story reinforces forgiveness and assistance as qualities attributed to Abram [20].

Symbolism of Bread and Wine

Melchizedek, king of Salem, brings bread and wine for Abram. This gesture may be to honor a war-weary man or as an offering to gods or victors, symbolizing reconciliation and the recognition of status [21]. It suggests Melchizedek acknowledges Abram's equal or superior status [22]. Bread symbolizes the grain of the land, abundant in Sodom, while wine represents wealth and agricultural produce. The choice of these items is linked to v. 11, where the people of Sodom lose all possessions, including food, making bread and wine symbols of salvation. In the future, overindulgence in wine and food leads to Sodom's downfall (Gn 13:13, 19:3). Melchizedek's modest offering contrasts with later excesses and symbolizes honor. Wine is also associated with Lot's people after his city's destruction (19:32–33) and bread with Ishmael's expulsion (21:14), suggesting the possibility of repairing family relations. The phrase "priest to the Highest God" implies that bread and wine may symbolize divine worship or gifts. Abram, a shepherd unfamiliar with crops (13:7), receives an offer that unites nomadic and settled peoples, recalling the rivalry between Cain (farmer) and Abel (shepherd). Here, bread and wine facilitate the reunification of rivals. Brotherhood is emphasized through repeated references to "brothers" (13:8; 14:12, 13, 14), highlighting Abram's ability to unite adversaries—an ideal leadership trait (19:3). The motif of bread and wine, peace,

and justice forms part of a covenant that strengthens perfection and unity, symbolized by repeated words and the pairing of bread and wine with heaven and earth [23].

Melchizedek's offering extends beyond food; he blesses Abram with the protection of the Highest God (vv. 19–20), which is customary in covenants where one party is stronger. Melchizedek may also give Abram a tithe of all he has returned. This can be interpreted in two ways: Melchizedek testifies that God gave Abram the tithe, or Abram is required to tithe upon receiving the blessing [24]. Ancient covenants suggest Melchizedek may have paid Abram a tithe, while the king of Sodom demands only the souls of his people, leaving property with Abram (v. 21) [25].

The mention of wine and bread in the context of tithes connects to Jerusalem's custom of yearly temple tithes. The tithe belongs to God, while the spoils of war belong to the victors. Analogies reinforce the explanation that the king (Abram) receives a tithe from God (Melchizedek), thereby strengthening Abram's status as the father of the nation and his greatness. There is also an implicit message that a human king needs God's tithe in the name of justice and equality. Alternatively, the tithe is God's gift to Abram, allowing annual gratitude for divine favor [26].

The Fourth Story: Comparison with the King of Sodom

The narrative continues from v. 17 through vv. 21–24, inviting comparisons between the king of Sodom and King Salem. The division of the king of Sodom's story into two parts is intentional. In v. 17, the king of Sodom does not offer blessings or food to welcome Abram, making the meeting's location—Valley of Shaveh—significant. The king of Sodom's status is lower than Abram's, contrasting with Melchizedek in Valley of Shaveh [27].

In v. 21, the king of Sodom offers property for the return of his people, referring to them as "souls." Abram refuses all property, stating symbolically, "from a thread to a shoelace," indicating he will not take anything, even the smallest item. Interpretations vary regarding the meaning of these items. Abram insists on not taking what is not rightfully his and requests acknowledgment that the king of Sodom did not enrich him (v. 23). Melchizedek's promise of a tithe in v. 20 adds complexity. The author employs wordplay with the consonants מעשׂר and העשׁרתי. The repeated mention of "property" throughout the chapter suggests economic equality and potential for an equal alliance. Abram's refusal to accept anything for himself demonstrates his noble qualities and contentment in serving others—qualities that establish him as the nation's leader.

Abram's response to the king of Sodom repeats the oath spoken by Melchizedek but adds God's name to the title "God Most High, Purchaser of heaven and earth," clarifying his faith's sovereign. He swears and refuses the king of Sodom's spoils to avoid indebtedness (v. 22), hinting that only what is divinely given should be accepted. Abram's character is reinforced as content and modest, recognized by God. He requests rewards for his three allies (v. 24), treating them with equality and concern for their interests. This completes a circle, presenting Abram as a leader who values his allies and upholds justice.

Abram's Leadership and Legacy

The story's message is that of a perfect leader. Abram, destined to lead the nation according to God's promises, demonstrates bravery, generosity, modesty, forgiveness, and the ability to form alliances and foster brotherhood among foreign nations. The narrative raises questions about places and customs—such as Dan, Valley of Shaveh, Salem, tithing, covenants, and the bread and wine offerings—while reflecting Abram's struggles in his personal life. These elements give Abram a seal of approval as the father of the nation and legitimize kingship through his character [28].

Wine emerges as a positive motif with its own merit. The modest offering of bread and wine gives the impression of a grand feast among equals, suggesting that gifts were used to secure covenants between stronger and weaker parties. In Abram's case, the unspecified quantities imply equality.

Meetings often take place in symbolic locations, such as Emek Shaveh, the Valley of the Kings, and a flat area (Gn 14:17), as well as other areas associated with tribal conflicts. Most agreements are made in neutral locations, maintaining equality. The repeated use of verbs such as "went out," "descended," "go," and "sent" describes how parties approach one another, with the weaker side typically initiating gestures to the stronger. Abram's meeting is unique in its mutual approach and lack of surprise.

The phrase "found favor" recurs in related stories, often linked to wine. In Abram's story, it is implied in the blessing, "Blessed be Abram to the Highest God... who protects and provides" (Gn 14:19–20). Abram seeks favor only from God, who blesses him through Melchizedek.

Other recurring themes include brotherhood and unity through military and agricultural cooperation. Agreements include verbal pledges of protection, with Abram

receiving blessings from Melchizedek and God, echoing broader patterns of compromise and alliance.

Covenant Patterns and Leadership Qualities

The covenants follow a recognizable pattern: approaching the opponent, exchanging food, questioning the agreement, blessing, protection, and property. In Abram's case, the pattern shifts: when the king of Sodom asks for his people, Abram requests that property be withheld as a token of the agreement. Unlike others, Abram refuses the property, positioning him as a noble leader whose status as father of the nation is emphasized.

Blessings are a key feature: Melchizedek blesses Abram with protection and wealth. Abram responds not directly to Melchizedek but to the king of Sodom, refusing to take anything from God. Abram's oath, "I will lift my hand," reflects a non-vindictive, non-warrior ideal, contrasting with David's frequent acts of revenge.

The story stands out as an agreement with a deity rather than merely a human contract. The narrative highlights doing good to the weaker parties, as seen in Abram's request for the welfare of his young men (Gn 14:24). Abram is adopted by Melchizedek, paralleling the relationship between God, the priest, and Abram. (Andersen 1995, 297, 506).

The motif of the donkey, bread, and wine symbolize property and the significance of offerings. The bread and wineskin tie the narrative strands together.

Wine and bread serve as flag motifs symbolizing agreements. The message is one of fair and respectful agreements, with leaders prospering by adhering to divine rules. Wine metaphorically represents tolerance, generosity, relaxation, and, at times, conflict and vengeance.

Summary

The use of "bread and wine" in the agreement between Abram and Melchizedek represents rival groups seeking balance and wholeness. Though not a common biblical pairing, both commodities are valuable for their agricultural significance and their role in fulfilling human needs. Bread and wine are seen as gifts from God and the result of human labor, making them suitable offerings in equal agreements. Their appearance without specified quantities symbolizes sacrifice, balance, and peace between adversaries.

Ultimately, wine and bread are positive symbols that support the rule of the father of the nation, Abram, and the Canaanite peoples.

Notes

[1] The name Abram is mentioned in the biblical source because his name had not yet been changed to Abraham.

[2] Gunkel claimed (according to A. Gaddes, 1800) that they are independent and small units of various types. Grossman finds messages in them on the political and social levels. Von Rad and Goldingay believe that there is a uniqueness here to an international narrative (Goldingay 2020, 230; see Grossman 2014, 85-6; Gunkel 1998, 80-1; Von Rad 2005, 175).

[3] Nm 21:29. For another case where a refugee from war is mentioned in connection with Jerusalem, see Ez 33:21, and for the Amalekite "man of the camp" who fled (2 Sm 1:2-3) from the war between Israel and the Philistines led by King Saul, whom David kills for murdering the king.

[4] Glender and Gunkel identify the author as a foreigner because he states that Abram is a Hebrew (Gn 14:13). In my opinion, there is no foreign writing here; rather, it's a nickname indicating that Abram came from somewhere else. This could be a retrospective justification for a later event or suggest that Abram was seen as a different person when he passed through Sodom's square. Zeron argues that Abram is called "Hebrew" by nomads or foreign peoples (compare Gn 39:14, Ex 1:16, 1 Sm 14:21), but also as a refuge. Jonah also identifies himself as a "Hebrew" to the foreign sailors on the ship (Jon 1:9). Artzi highlights a parallel to an Akkadian document from the second millennium BCE, which describes the status of nomads known as *Habīru*; according to Ugaritic and Egyptian records, they were also referred to as *Afiru*. This term signifies a socially lower status in various nations, such as in Syria and the Land of Israel. They held a better status during conflicts between cities. They were hired as soldiers, or when they sought refuge between cities, like the Edomites, the king of El-Lakh (15th century BCE), and during the Amarna period. In other words, Abram's status was that of a landless, nomadic person, bound by covenants rather than crossing a river. (Artzi et al. 1993, 105; Glender 2006, 98; Zeron 1982, 129).

[5] Mamre is mentioned as Abram's place of residence (13:18) and is not mentioned as an Amorite area. Some identify Mamre with Hebron, as Ramban does. Is Mamre intentionally mentioned to remind us that Abram has a covenant and therefore resides there? In v. 24, the name Mamre is mentioned (without the oaks). It seems that Abram's trained camp is divided between three allies. Making such a covenant reminds Zeron of the story of Jehoiada, who made a covenant between God, the king, and the people,

thereby breaking down the altars and restoring the king to the throne (2 Kgs 11:4) (Goldingay 2020, 235; Zeron 1982, 131–2).

[6] Eshkol – Nm 13:24, 32:9, and Aner is a city of refuge.

[7] The title "brother" is mentioned in the ancient Near East when people made a covenant that indicated the economic adoption of an adult (see the Nuzi adoption tablets) or in a state of war, when kings of cities fight together, they are called *axum*, a kind of brotherhood, as can be found in Mari (FM II.117.29; 118.6). In the case of Abram and his allies, it is not stated whether there is peace or war between them (Gn 14:13 and compare Zec 11:14). In cases of brotherhood, the brothers are obligated to each other in matters of military aid and diplomacy, but not in giving gifts or granting territories (Anbar 2007, 92-3; Stone, Owen and Mitchell 1991; Roth 1984).

[8] Hobah and Damascus – an allusion to the borders of the land reflecting the period of David's kingdom. Abram's covenant with the kings (Gn 15:18, compared to Gn 10:19) prompts him to pursue the kings as far as the city of Hobah, located to the left of Damascus. This allusion to David's conquest of Aram-Damascus (2 Sm 8:5-6) establishes a border as far as Hamath. Damascus is perhaps identified with *Upi*, which was called in a letter to Pharaoh Amenhotep III, in the *Apum* inscriptions, and in the Mari documents. It was also known as Darmesh (1 Chr 5:18, 16:2, 24:23, 28:23) and as *ša imêrišu* (the city of his donkey), because it was a city through which caravans of nomadic donkeys passed, and a special breed of donkeys grew up there. On the other hand, it may be from the term *Hamer*, meaning one who is engaged in leading caravans of donkeys. Some believe that it is a Hurrian name for the Assyrian name for Damascus. (Heltzer et al. 1993, 106; Speiser 2008, 104); Weinfeld et al. 1993, 102-3).

[9] Dan is a settlement in the north, as mentioned in Damascus and Hobah (v. 15), and see also Dt 34. According to Nm 2:25, Dt 33:22 and Jgs 18, 20:1, Dan (probably a corruption of the name "Dedan" which is at the northern end of the Euphrates), is found in the north and from the common name "from Dan to Beersheba" (1 Sm 3:20, 2 Sm 24:15). If so, Abram's pursuit to Dan is an anachronism according to Von Rad. The basis for the story recorded here is found in documents from Mari (according to Malamat, 1970), which are part of military diplomatic campaigns from the 18th century BCE. The author employed a two-part model, drawing inspiration from a distinct literary form: the first part, in the style of a list of annals (vv. 1-16), and the second part, serving as a historical record to glorify the kings. But in the present story, it is Abram who is praised for his victories. Nevertheless, it is puzzling why the kings retreat instead of moving forward, while Abram pushed them back into place? (Glender 2006, 100-1; Goldingay 2020, 235; Heltzer et al. 1993, 106; Von Rad 2005, 178).

[10] There are stories in the Bible of kings' victories, thanks to divine intervention (see 2 Chr 2:16-17, 13:20-3, 14:14-8), and in all of them, despite the surprise, the merit of God's heroism remains evident. The model here is reversed; Abram acts alone on his own initiative and, in practice, does not take property that does not belong to him. Conversely, when God helped him in Egypt, he took the property that was given to him (Gn 12:20-13:2). This is an unusual aspect of the story, indicating that Abram's entitlement to receive the land was not only a result of a blessing, but also a consequence of his deeds. This definition of a political and diplomatic outlook allows for acting independently, based on initiative, and defines allies under God's protection. Therefore, Abram is awarded the inheritance of the land in chap. 15. Brueggemann believes that the purpose of the story is to portray Abram as a nobleman and an exemplary family man, and Grossman also connects Abram with the father of the nation (Brueggemann 1982, 135; Grossman 2014, 92-4).

[11] According to BDB – simple. The phrase *Valley of Shaveh*, according to Rashi, refers to a place where the nations of the world made Abram their king. The meaning of the name suggests an equal status between the two leaders, Abram and King Salem. The mention of the two valleys indicates the meeting between two groups of leaders: the kings and Abram, who return from war to meet with Melchizedek. As a result, the reader is prepared to be moved by this meeting. Despite the identification, the question arises as to why Melchizedek meets Abram halfway back to the square of Sodom? According to Artzi, the king of Sodom welcomes Abram in *Valley of Shaveh*, which is identified with the *Kidron Valley*, located between the *Valley of Ben Hinnom* south of the City of David (2 Sm 18:18), precisely where he resides. In mentioning the place where the king of Sodom and Abram met, Artzi argues, there is a reason for attributing importance and holiness to Jerusalem, which was a foreign land in the days of David, and thus linking it to the father of the nation. Weinfeld supports this by claiming that it is an ancient tradition that the *Dead Sea* (v. 3) is *Kadesh* (v. 7) and the King's Valley (v. 17). Goldingay suggests that the place is identified with the place to which Absalom fled during the rebellion, which is identified with the *Beit HaKerem Valley* in Jerusalem and is based on 2 Sm 18:18, 1QapGen 22:13-14, but these are retrospective interpretations (Elgavish 2001, 496; Artzi et al. 1993, 100-1; Goldingay 2020, 231, 236; Grossman 2014, 86-7; Glender 2006, 98; Hamilton 1990, 365; Weinfeld et al. 1993, 102).

[12] The King's Valley is identified with Jerusalem according to: "He came to Salem, which is Jerusalem, and Abram camped in the Valley of Sheva, and the King's Valley is in the Valley of Beth-Kerem" (External Scroll to Genesis, p. 40, and in Josephus, Antiquities 1, p. 180). According to Keel, the reception of Abram by the King of Sodom in the King's Valley is a contrast to the reception of King Shelem, in which a blessing was pronounced,

and an offering was given. V. 17 is broken in that it lacks continuity, as it supposedly indicates a time when Abraham returns, the King of Sodom goes out to meet him, and at the same time, King Shelem appears. A similar phenomenon occurs in v. 13 when a refugee comes to tell Abram what he told is missing from the text, and it is immediately told where Abram is sitting. (Keel 1997, 386; Ἡρόδοτος and Shor 1935, 180; Emanueli 1970, 70).

[13] Winfield and Grossman wonder about the interruption of the encounter with the king of Sodom and a later return to him. In terms of geographical location, this does not work out, since the king of Sodom is located southeast, while Melchizedek is in the Jerusalem area (see note 20) (Weinfeld et al. 1993, 106; Grossman 2014, 84).

[14] The term *Salem* is based on the statement in Ps 76:3 for Zion, but the connection is not clear. In the etymological identification of *Salem*, according to Onkelos and Rabbah, there are descriptive and literary elements that portray a priest to the Highest God. That is, Abraham chooses Jerusalem, and what it represents – justice (1QapGen. Rab. 43:6). According to Hamilton, in Hebrew, it is common to drop part of the name as the first element. Suppose the first element is Uru (city) in Sumerian. In that case, the name "Uru-Shalim" may also be a Sumerian name given to it when it was a border city, even before Jerusalem came under David's control. He proves this according to an external scroll to the book of Genesis (1 Qap Gn 22:13 see note 13). Houston supports this claim through the LXX and the Roman translations, as evident in the comparison between Melchizedek and Salem, which corresponds to Jerusalem. In addition, he parallels the Ugaritic story of *Keret* by finding the root *Slm* and interpreting it as the name of a god, and Melchizedek as the title of God. On the other hand, he attempts to proves that Salem signifies a covenant of peace. According to Rashbam, another identification of Salem with *Shechem* (Nablus) is identified from the time of Jacob with Shechem (Gn 33:17-20). It is based on the LXX, Peshitta, and Vulgate translations. Perhaps there is a definition that explains the difference between these two cities in terms of their distinct pronunciation, such as the exchange of consonants between Shiloh and Salem. According to Shadal, these are cities that were together: Gibeon, Shechem, Shiloh, Nebo, and Jerusalem. However, Sodom is in southeastern Judea, not in the mountains of Samaria. Albright identified the name as Shalem[o], and in his opinion, Melchizedek is a nickname for Abraham, who was both a king and a vassal. Houston bases this on Gn 34:21 when Jacob also meets Esau and calls it *Salem* (in addition to using the expression "a spacious land" – compare with Gn 13:9, Am 1:9). One could also think of a corruption of the place name *Laish*, the seat of the tribe of Dan, and having a platform as a contrast to Jerusalem in which the only temple is found. (Artzi et al. 1993, 105); (Albright 1961, 36–54); (Dimant and Parry 2014, 28;

Elgavish, 1988, 31 f. 23, 89; Elgavish 2001, 496–7; Grossman 2014, 85, 88-9; Hamilton 1990, 366; Keel 1997, 388; Houston 1965, 139-44; Von Rad 2005, 179).

[15] According to Rashi, Melchizedek is the son of Noah (Nederim 22b). Rabbah states that Melchizedek is a king in the place of Tzedek (צֶדֶק – Justice). Therefore, it is a collective name or the name of the city of Tzedek, and this may refer to Jerusalem (see Is 1:21, Ps 45:13, 1QapGen. Raba 43:6 and compare Adonei-Tzedek in Josh 10:1) according Weinfeld in the sense of 'plain' and 'justice' (2 Sm 8:15; Is 9:6, 16:5), i.e. the city of Tzedek (Is 1:26; Jer 31:22). Hamilton saw here a descriptive name (Ezr 3:2, Hg 1:1) or an adjective (like Jehozadek – upright God or God is justice), or a characteristic of a city and a person – a pursuer of justice, based on the behaviour of Abram and Melchizedek and based on the interpretation of the name of the king of Sodom (Bare – bad man). Hence, Melchizedek is identified with Jerusalem based on the words 'Zedek' and 'Shalem' as a theophoric name (Zedek – 1 Kgs 2:35; Zedekiah – 2 Kgs 17:24; Jehozadek – 2 Chr 5:41 all related to Judah and Jerusalem). However, Keel interprets the name Melchizedek as a nickname, like Pharaoh (compare Is 1:21, 26; Jer 31:22, and 1QapGen 2:13). Houston also denies that such a suffix indicates Jerusalem or a deity associated with a place that was never mentioned. Therefore, he suggests that there is no definite identification with either the city or the king, and perhaps it still has a connection to the story of *Keret* and the city of Edom. Houston finds further evidence of the connection between Melchizedek and Abram in the Phoenician writer *Sanchuni-Athon*, translated by Philo of Meghil into Greek. Historical evidence suggests that Melchizedek originated from the city of Argizim, which is connected to Mount Gerizim. Still, he qualifies this possibility, suggesting that perhaps these traditions originate from the Samaritans, who identify themselves with Shechem, where a temple to the God of the Covenant was located. Other evidence from the *Amarna letters* on Vat 327 tablet mentions the name Rabitzedki in l. 45, and this is in a letter written by Egyptian called 'Ezru' to "brother" after *Ezru, king of Amoru*. In 11Q13, the name Melchizedek serves as a substitute for the name of God, as per Is 61:2, in the interpretation of the scroll's roles, where God is also portrayed as the judge of the people of Israel: מלכיצדק יעשה את נקמת משפטי האל משפטינ מיקום צדקו מלכי.

It also seems that the interpreters continue the hypothesis that Melchizedek is God or is considered part of the two messiahs. Suppose Melchizedek serves as a priest of God. In that case, it follows that Abram serves as his servant and builds an altar to God (Gn 23:6). According to the story, it seems that the foreign Melchizedek blesses in the name of his God. Still, according to verse 22, there is a complete identification of God with the name (see Ex 24:16, Dt 32:8, Ps 7:18, 78:35). The scholarly discussion of the name Melchizedek in both the Qumran literature, which interprets the Bible, and in pre-Christian literature is extremely rich. In addition, according to Hamilton,

Melchizedek is first mentioned in Hebrews 5:6–10; 6:20–7:28, where Jesus is called a priest forever by the name of Melchizedek (the reference is based on Ps 110:4). In v. 10, the name of the Messiah, Jesus, is mentioned. He is defined as a high priest. In chapter 7, which expands Genesis from an interpretative perspective, there is a parallel between Jesus and Melchizedek in the context of the superiority of the priesthood, in their lack of lineage (the priesthood was not inherited by them), and both are in the role of blessers and are presented as a superior figure. That is, there is They have the power to give life forever (7:16) and therefore they are priests forever (7:24). The second parallel to the story is expressed in Melchizedek blessing Abram in the name of the God of *heaven and earth* like the blessing to Jesus in 7:7. And the third parallel is when Abram gives a tithe to Melchizedek of everything (7:4-6, 10). This action is akin to donating to the temple. From this, it appears that Melchizedek is attributed great honour, like that of Jesus, when believers follow him (Heb 5:6-10, 6:20, 7:1-28). Another reference to Melchizedek in the New Testament (according to Is 61:1-2) is as a figure of the Judge of the Day of Judgment who appears in heaven, and after him, the Day of Judgment when the sentence is carried out. In addition, both Jesus and Melchizedek are attributed to being from the tribe of Judah; however, Hamilton believes that this cannot be attributed to Jesus or the divine qualities that Melchizedek represents. Hence, the figure of Melchizedek, "It provided an anchor for the emerging Christian movement to establish credibility among the people" (Hamilton 1990: 366). The title El Elyon, according to Onkelos, means "other gods" (Ex 20:3; Dt 10:7), and according to the Ramban, it refers to a priest serving other nations. The title "El Elyon" is not the name of a Canaanite god (v. 18), because the addition of "Buyer of heaven and earth" refers to the Creator of heaven and earth and alludes to the God of Gen 1. Some believe that there may be a fusion of two separate deities here, "El" and "Elyon" or an alternative name. However, "El Elyon" is a synonym for God, based on various sources (Ps 7:11, 55:3, 88:35 refer to God as El Elyon). The Judean Desert sect during the Hasmonean period in 142 BCE, reinforces the idea that this is not a god based on Ps 110:4, and this idea continues In the New Testament, there is a reference to the head of the state as a 'high priest forever' (1 Mc 14:4, 41). As well as the appearance of the title 'high priest' in 1QapGen col 22:15; 1Q20:20 (Cekiera 2021, 412, 424; Brueggemann 1982, 138-9; Chirilă, Pașca-Tușa and Onețiu 2017; Cochavi-Rainey and Rainey 2014, 172; Dimant and Parry 2014, 20; Elgavish 2001, 496; Flowers 2016, 194; Goldingay 2020, 238-9; Hamilton 1990, 366, 370; Houston 1965, 146-552; Keel 1997, 387-9; Speiser 2008, 104, f. 16; Weinfeld et al. 1993, 106; Zakovitch 1992, 22-34).

[16] In my view, there is a touch of arrogance here: the king is equated with God. However, these terms can also be interpreted to indicate the equality of God and the king under divine law, or that justice and equality are principles guiding the actions of both

God and the king. Nonetheless, the term 'God' here might be considered synonymous with the king. In any case, a parallel exists between the king and God, as well as between equality and justice. However, Emanueli does not see the connection between expressions such as "brother," "equal," and "Highest God" as similar to other phrases in the Torah. (Emanueli 1970, 68).

[17] Von Rad links everything to the legitimization of God, who allows Melchizedek to grant Abram control over a Canaanite city (perhaps Jebus, which became Jerusalem) and thus prepares David to reign over it as a descendant of Abram. The description of "buyer of heaven and earth" (Ps 133:3) means creator buyer or owner, in allusion to the Canaanite god. Such inscriptions, including the Phoenician texts and the Karatepe inscription (Cilicia), from the 8th-9th century BCE, identify God with creation (*ʾl qn ʾrṣ* – "El, the creator of the earth"). The descendants of El in the Phoenician tradition were called priests of the Highest god, as were also the Hittite and Hurrian traditions. Philo of Gebel speaks of Elion, the highest, Uranus, Heaven, and Elus, God, and Adud, Hadad-Baal (equivalent to the names of Hittite and Hurrian gods). The Canaanites call Elus – 'God of the Earth'. That is, there is a distinction between a Highest God and a God who is the chief between heaven and earth (see the Aramaic prophecy from Sfira, dated to the 8th century BCE). In contrast to the belief of Israel that there is no distinction, but that there is one God and that is what they call *Elohim* (Ps 9:3, 47:3, Dt 32:8). In the Bible, "buyer" is mentioned in the context of property or possession, and sometimes also creation, so the possibility of interpreting this makes sense (Gn 4:1; Ex 15:16; Dt 32:16; Ps 78:54, 139:13) and at the same time also of a shelter or shelter (Prv 8:22, 14). In parallel with other Semitic languages, when the intention is to create, in Ugarit, according to the myth of Anat (Aqht UT 2 VI:15-16, 41 and UT, 76: III:5–7). In parallel with Dt 6, the pronoun *qnyn dyknn* is "He who created (made, fashioned) us" and therefore, *qnyn* must be "our Creator, Father." A 9th-century BCE Aramaic inscription from Kilamuwa also indicates the root *qny* meaning to create: [*smr z qn klmw br ḥy] for Rakib-ʾEl*. ("Son of Haya, fashioned grant him length of life May Rakib-ʾEl." (Swiggers 1982, 249–53). Brueggemann notes that "creator of heaven and earth" is a well-known formula from Israelite literature (Habel, N. 1972) that indicates a crisis of faith, and its meaning is help in a difficult moment as a consolation or use for blessing and strength in life, that is, it is a greater understanding of the deity. He adds and links to the name another dimension in which the text may be interpreted and understood, such as the concept of syncretism (worship of many gods besides God, as described in the Bible) or the adoption of the worship of one god, specifically the Israelite God, according to him. He bases his words on translations that reflect the takeover of worshipping God over worshipping other gods, and thus, the church adopted this approach based on the phrase "creator of heaven and

earth." He sees a great complexity in the two divinities, one referring to the Creator and the other to the Redeemer, in historical terms, and Abram is aware of this (Brueggemann 1982, 136-7; Von Rad 2005, 180-1; Hamilton 1990, 367-8; Keel 1997, 387; Weinfeld et al. 1993, 106).

[18] The historical period is the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4), during which there was an attempt to unify worship of God in one place to prevent an invasion by the Assyrians, which was perceived as punishment for sins. Hezekiah rebels against Sennacherib, king of Assyria, who came to fight him in his 14th year (2 Kgs 18:13). An echo of the struggle can be seen in the tension that developed with the birth of Dan, immediately after the birth of Judah, when Rachel envies her fertile sister Leah (Gn 29:35-36), and also in Jacob's blessings that give the two sons control (Gn 49:8-12 compared to 16-17), with other brothers intervening between the blessings. Similar tensions are found in the story of Samson (Jgs 13:2), when his father, from the tribe of Dan, lived in the region of Judah (Zera).

[19] And continuing with the kings from the house of Judah. See David's will to Solomon 1 Kgs 2:3, 6:11-13.

[20] The story in 1 Sm 30 recounts David's efforts to rescue his wives and children (1 Sm 30:22) from Amalekite captivity, while also recovering all the people of Ziklag after they had burned it. For this reason, there are many striking similarities between the stories: the people of Sodom, including Abram's family, were taken captive (Gn 14:11-12), and it seems that the city was destroyed (the same applies when God burned it in Gn 19:24-25, 28-29). The phrase "and they went" appears (Gn 14:2, 10, 24) as opposed to "those who went with me" (1 Sm 30:22). In both, the impression is created that in terms of the wording of the sentence, the phrase is placed in an odd position: the captivity similar mentioned together with the people (Gn 14:15); In 1 Sm 30:9-10, 14, there are 600 warriors, four hundred of whom remained with David and are called "boys" compared to Abram's 318 boys (Gn 14:14). In both, typological numbers are mentioned; in 1 Sam 30:11 a refugee comes in the form of an Egyptian man, and in Gn 14:13; Similar to the phrase "from a thread to a shoelace" in Gn 14:23, the phrase "and there was nothing lacking to them from the least to the greatest" in 1 Sm 32:19 emphasizes that nothing was lacking from the captivity in property or people; additional emphasis on the phrase "Behold, you have a blessing from the spoil of the enemies of the LORD" (1 Sm 32:26) similar to Melchizedek's blessing (Gn 14:20) and finally the mention of food: 1 Sm 32:16 refers to a feast-celebration of the Amalekites, which ends with David killing them. It should be noted that camels are used as a means of escape, whereas in Gn 14:18, Abram is given "wine and bread" when he returns from the war. The Egyptian refugee receives bread, a slice of bread, two raisins, and water from David (1 Sm 12). He also makes an

oath with David (v. 15) so that he can reveal to him where the enemy is and ensure his life. According to Weinfeld, these are motifs found only in David's wars, as are Abram's concern for the participants in the war (Gn 14:24 vs. 1 Sm 30:23-24), pursuit of captives (1 Sm 30:19), and other similar idioms (Gn 14:17, 18:6 vs. 1 Sm 30:21; Gn 15:14 vs. 1 Sm 30:10; Gn 14:20-14 vs. 1 Sm 25:22-23). However, Brueggemann finds no solid evidence for this (Brueggemann 1982, 135; Hamilton 1990, 370; Weinfeld et al. 1993, 102-3).

[21] Melchizedek brought bread and wine to provide provisions for exhausted warriors, as is customary (based on the Midrash of Genesis Rabbah, which implies offerings of offerings). Rashi refers to this as "taking out of the treasures" to assist those who come from war. And Rivash adds, as in 2 Sm 17:27. RSG notes that this is the reason Melchizedek is called the priest of the Most High God, the servant of God. Grossman adds that Melchizedek brings out wine and bread for Abram, in contrast to the king of Sodom, who does not bless him at all, meaning that he does not wish to establish an economic relationship (Grossman 2014b, 89; Hamilton 1990, 366; Keel 1997, 387-9).

[22] Bringing wine and bread to Abram as an offering has a ritual significance (Paschim 15:1:5, B. Talmud). Bread and wine are equivalent in meaning (Dt 29:5; Ps 104:15; Eccl 10:19; Prv 4:17). In the opinion of Houston Hamilton, Grossman, and others, this has a political significance because the king brings the offering himself, and according to the nature of his blessings. In their opinion, a feast was also held with their agreement. They base this on Gn 26:30, 31:54, and Ex 24:11. Some scholars suggest comparing Dt 23:4-5 with the law prohibiting hospitality to Ammonites and Moabites, as they did not provide the Israelites with bread and water when they came to their land. It seems that Abram is the only one who receives the honour after fighting in a coalition of many warriors. It is inevitable to associate the story with both the Gibeonites (Josh 9) and 1 Sm 10:3. While Brueggemann claims that the bringing of tithing is not a gift but rather an acknowledgment of a subordinate to his superior. In addition, Hamilton finds a place to compare it to the letter of Tudhaliya IV, king of Hatti, who writes to his vassal, Shalmaneser I, king of Assyria (KU13 XXII 103: 4-5): "If he (Shalmaneser) would enter my land of, If I as to enter his…we would eat the bread of one another". Another example of a gift in a treaty is found in Abraham's treaty with Abimelech (Gn 21:27), where Abraham gives him sheep and cattle. In the second treaty between Abimelech and Isaac (Gn 26:30-31), an agreement was made at a feast. On both occasions, there were quarrels over water wells in the Beersheba area. The fact that agreements were made over water control areas in Beersheba is very different from the place where the treaty with Melchizedek was made. However, there was a later altar in Beersheba (Gn 46:1; 2 Kgs 23:8; Am 5:5). If Beersheba, in the territory of Simeon and annexed to Judah, may be a negligible place, the writer does not ignore its importance. Likewise, the covenants can

be considered part of the altar offerings, mixed with water from the wells, but there is a distance in this in that there is no mention of Isaac's feast with wine, except in an implied way (Dziadosz 2023, 335–65; Brueggemann 1982, 135; Elgavish 2001, 497; Hamilton 1990, 376-9; Houston 1965, 136; Otten 1959, 42–3; Malamat 1955, 175-182; Morschauser 2013, 142).

[23] According to the Sages, it does not appear that the symbols bread and wine were given a serious status. However, Gen. Raba. 33:6 refers to this from various aspects: the bread is the showbread of the Temple, and the wine is the wine of consecration, which is used on the altar when a sacrifice is offered (Ex 25:13, 30; Nm 4:7, 15:10, 28:14; 1 Kgs 7:48). However, it is worth noting that Melchizedek did not bring an animal sacrifice. But the Sages compare this to the work in the Temple in Jerusalem. In another interpretation of Gen. Raba. compares the bread and wine to the Torah, as part of God's gifts (see Prv 9:5). According to the Midrash, Abba Kahana sees that wine is always mentioned in a negative context except for this case, and according to Rabbi Levi it is a symbol of the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (based on Gn 15:13) which is a later tradition that developed. Philo also notes that Melchizedek did not bring out bread and water as usual for the guests, but rather wine. Similarly, in the external scroll of Genesis, it states "food and drink," whereas all translations refer to the matter of bread and wine (Grypeou and Spurling 2013, 211-5).

[24] Melchizedek, the priest, blesses Abram as God's beloved because he went out to volunteer and help, by Rabah. This is also a well-known Phoenician blessing of God, or, according to the Hebrews, of God (Ps 7:18). Melchizedek's blessing corresponds to the blessing with which Abram is blessed before and after inheriting the land and receiving recognition of his power from the kings of the East. The Most High God is also blessed here by Melchizedek (Nm 24:16, Ps 107:11, and in the inversion of Ps 57:3, parallel to the God of Israel Ps 78:35) (Brueggemann 1982, 135; Hamilton 1990, 367; Keel 1997, 390).

[25] Compare 1Q20 col. 211:1-. (Dimant and Parry 2014, 26-7).

[26] It is not clear whether God the Most High will receive a tithe, or whether it will be Melchizedek or perhaps Abram. Most commentators argue that Abram is the one who gives a tithe to Melchizedek from all his property (according to the subject in the law and according to Heb 7:6), and that it is only logical that he would pay the king a tithe from what he acquired in the war. However, the traditional interpretation (such as Yosef Kimchi) holds that Melchizedek is the one who gives, as he says, "You are the one who tithes according to the law." According to Moshe Kimchi, it is not logical that Abram gives to Melchizedek and does not take it for himself. In other words, it is a gift, and therefore, he is not liable to pay tax from the spoils to the king in whose name he fought. But Keel believes that the tithe belongs to the king according to the king's law

(1 Sm 8:4). Grossman adds to the lack of clarity the author's intention for deliberate ambiguity to confuse the reader and emphasize the reciprocity between Melchizedek and Abram, that it does not matter which of them gives tithes, as in their meeting in the Valley of Shava. Zeron believes that the expression 'tithe' is not related to this period. Without a doubt, the comparison is necessary to the temple service and the gift given to God when successful in his name in wars. 1 Sm 31:17 provides evidence for taking the spoils of war, when it is the warriors who receive the spoils, as does 1 Sm 30:30 when David's two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail, are kidnapped by the Amalekites and released after fighting the Amalekites (this explains why women are mentioned exceptionally in chapter 14). For an extensive discussion of the matter. Regarding the tithe mentioned above, the question should be raised again whether there is a basis here for giving Tithes from the people to the priests, so that the king would not have to pay them, or is this about the king's own temple? According to Glender, there is also a precedent here for bringing tithes to the priestly/religious establishment that was only done later (Glender 2006, 103; Grossman 2014b, 86-7; Hamilton 1990, 368-9; Keel 1997, 390-1; Weinfeld et al. 1993, 102; Zeron 1982, 129).

[27] According to Grossman, this leap encourages the reader to make a comparison between the two stories of Melchizedek, the king of Salem, and the king in the context of Abram's contrasting attitudes towards the two kings. In both, there are similar expressions, such as "And he brought forth, and he came forth, the Most High God by the heaven and earth, and gave him/gave me," which share a similarity in both linguistic style and content, in the sense of bringing forth things. In Grossman's opinion, this is an expression of the Bible's sensitivity to idolatry. The difference between the stories is that Abram objects to the king of Sodom but does not harm Melchizedek and feels a friendship and religious appreciation for him that is not explicitly stated. There is a chiastic structure here within the story of the encounter itself. However, Elgavish thinks that the meeting with Melchizedek in the middle of the encounter with the king of Sodom is unnecessary and therefore creates a contrast. Glender views verses 17-24 as a dramatic story, which is described in detail compared to the limited first part. Therefore, the question is whether these are not two scenes in which Abram meets with the kings Melchizedek and the king of Sodom, as mentioned in v. 17. This idea is not plausible in his opinion, because the king of Sodom comes to Abram without blessing him, and Melchizedek goes out to meet Abram. As a result, it is unclear whether they both arrived at the same place in the Valley of Sheva, and Abram also does not return the blessing to Melchizedek. Glender suggests that verses 17-24 present two angles to the same meeting: one, it was with the king of Sodom, and the other with King Shelem. In the first, property and life were discussed, and in the second, a ceremony was performed in Abram's honour. Knowing the exact

location of the Valley of Shaveh would help determine who came out to meet him first, but the beginning of the meeting with the king of Sodom is missing, and the meeting with King Shelem lacks a description of its conclusion. It could be argued that there is a lack of courtesy on the part of the king of Sodom, who wants to rush and close a deal with Abram. Perhaps this indicates his character, in contrast to Abram's description and the scene with King Shelem. Thus, it appears that the King of Sodom's offer is part of a ritual performed by King Salem, and Abram's response to the King of Sodom is, in fact, a response to Melchizedek, which raises a theological debate: Who is God? Abraham will later call Him God of the World (Gn 21:33) (Elgavish 2001, 495; Grossman 2014b, 85-6; Glender 2006, 102-3).

[28] Wenham believes that there is a record of three battle stories here that reflect vv. 17-24. In these battles, property was seized, allies were formed, and the spoils were divided. The work incorporates a larger story. Abram's concern for Lot highlights his paternal instincts and explains his capacity to become the father of the nation. It also emphasizes Abram's generosity, which was also hinted at in Gn 13:13. According to Wenham, Melchizedek is important here because he draws the reader's attention to Lot on the one hand, and on the other hand, he serves as the one who blesses Abram in God's name. Unlike Abram, Lot chooses prosperity and wealth over Abram's rejection of tithes and wealth. Lot's departure creates tension between the two as they separate and Abram is left alone because he still has no descendants. Another tension is the moral tension that raises the issue: Can Abram claim the property of the sinful people of Sodom? But he is not tempted and offers to take only for his allies and his men who fought with him. From this, Wenham concludes that this is a voluntary sacrifice to a legitimate and righteous king, as the meaning of his name is presented here in a positive light (Westermann 1995, 185–208; Von Rad 2005, 174–81; Wenham 2017, 58-61, 73-7).

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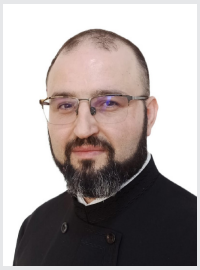
The Sacrifice of Isaac in Byzantine Art – Christological Perspectives of Interpretation

Abstract

This study analyses the typological dimension of the sacrifice of Isaac, son of Abraham, which the Church Fathers consider as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The starting point of the research is the analysis of the Christological interpretations made by some of the most representative Fathers of Christian Antiquity from the 2nd to the 4th centuries, such as Meliton of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, and others. They identified in the sacrifice of Isaac a typological perspective anticipating the Savior's sacrifice on the cross. The study also analyses how these theological perspectives influenced Byzantine art between the 6th and 16th centuries. It focuses on artistic representations from Ravenna, Palermo, and Sicily, as well as relevant frescoes from the Macedonian and Cretan schools. The main objective of this research is to highlight the Christological elements and the interdependence between patristic texts and Byzantine iconography, thus emphasising the artists' ability to offer unique interpretations, while aligning them with the Church Tradition.



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Introduction

Isaac, the son of the patriarch Abraham, is considered by the Church Fathers a type/ symbol of Jesus Christ, and his sacrifice is seen in the same interpretive tradition as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of the Son of God on the Cross. This gives Isaac and his bloodless sacrifice a privileged status among the Old Testament persons/ events that

refer to Jesus Christ and his saving activity. Meliton of Sardis, Clement the Alexandria, Origen, St. Athanasius the Great, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Ephrem the Syrian, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Gregory the Great are some of the Church Fathers who present in detail the elements that make the typological dimension of the event that took place on Mount Moriah (Pașca-Tușa and Vidican-Manci 2021, 150–64). Their interpretations, which intertwine and complement each other, provide an overview of how this Old Testament episode was received in Christian communities in both the East and the West.

Even if I have considered the evolution that the interpretation of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah had in the most representative Church Fathers of the 2nd-4th centuries, I will only insist on this aspect in the first part of the study, where I will present the main typological / Christological interpretation directions assumed by the Church Tradition. This perspective will allow us to understand the theological background from which the Byzantine artists/painters/iconographers drew their inspiration when representing the sacrifice of Isaac. In this study, therefore, I intend to highlight how Byzantine artists captured the Christological dimension of the event on Moriah. I will focus on the mosaics/ miniatures/ frescoes produced over a thousand years (6th-16th centuries) in the Byzantine area and in the territories influenced by this artistic style of representation (Italy, Sicily). I will pay particular attention to the mosaics from Ravenna, Palermo, and Sicily, to the miniatures of Cosmas Indicopleustes, and some representative frescoes from the Byzantine schools of painting: Macedonian (Gračanica Monastery in Serbia) and Cretan (Athonite monasteries of Stavronikita and St. Dionysius) to capture the histological representation of the sacrifice of Isaac in its complexity.

This line of research complements previous studies in which we first analysed the manner of representation of the sacrifice in the first centuries (I-VI), both in the Jewish and Christian environment (Pașca-Tușa 2016, 123–38), and then we considered the attitude of the patriarch Abraham during the sacrifice in Byzantine representations (Pașca-Tușa 2021, 62–76). Noting the lack of research that explicitly emphasizes the Christological elements in these artistic representations, I considered that such an approach would be welcome, especially since, in Romanian and international spaces, there are no studies in this direction. In the Romanian specialized literature, there is only one study by the professor of Byzantine Art, Marcel Muntean (2019, 249-60), which investigates how the sacrifice of Isaac passes from the scriptural word to the icon. The author mentions some elements that allow a Christological interpretation,

substantiates them patristically, and exemplifies them only with representations from the first Christian centuries. Our study adopts the methodology and results of this research, placing greater emphasis on the patristic texts and the remarkable Byzantine representations from the period in question. In international literature, the sacrifice of Isaac is analysed from several perspectives. The studies carried out by scholars focus on the evolution of the representation of the sacrifice in both Jewish and Christian environments and emphasize the particularity of famous representations, whether from Western or Eastern Europe (Van Woerden 1961, 214-55; Altripp 2015, 35-48; see also Smith 1922, 159-73; Gutmann 1987, 67-89; Bloch 2016, 96-130; Lowden 2003; Kessler 2004; Pentiuc 2019; Ștefănescu 1973), but without insisting on the Christological particularities, which are mentioned in passing.

Therefore, to achieve the objective of this study (to identify the Christological elements in the Byzantine representations of Isaac's sacrifice), we will first synthesize the Christological interpretations that the Eastern and Western fathers of the 2nd-6th centuries carry out on the subject of the Patriarch's sacrifice, and then we will analyse how this theological message was received in Byzantine Christian art from the 6th century until the golden age of the Byzantine schools of painting (14th-16th centuries). This scholarly approach will highlight the interdependence between patristic literature (tradition) and iconography. It will emphasize that Christian artists can realize an interpretation that is not dependent on or based on a scriptural/ patristic text. In other words, artists can develop a particular understanding of a biblical text. Still, they cannot position themselves by their way of relating to Holy Scripture outside the Church Tradition.

The Christological Character of Isaac's Sacrifice in the Patristic Tradition

Meliton, the bishop of Sardis, one of the most prominent personalities of the second century, gives in one of his homilies a succinct account of the main elements underlying the type-antitype relationship between Isaac and Jesus Christ: the carrying of the wood on his back; the acceptance of the sacrifice without resistance; the realization that he is to be sacrificed; and the binding of his hands and feet before the sacrifice. According to Meliton, Isaac's courage was due to his trust in his father. This led him to bear the Lord's model with fortitude:

> "For as a ram he was bound / and as a lamb he was shorn / and as a sheep he was led to slaughter / and as a lamb he was crucified; / and he carried the wood on his shoulders

> … / as he was led up to be slain like Isaac by his Father. / For it was a strange mystery to behold, / a son led by his father to a mountain for slaughter, / whose feet he bound and whom he put on the wood of the offering / preparing with zeal the things for his slaughter. / But Isaac was silent, bound like a ram, / not opening his mouth nor uttering a sound. / For not frightened by the sword / nor alarmed at the fire / nor sorrowful at the suffering, / he carried with fortitude the model of the Lord." (*On Pascha and Fragments* IX) (Melito of Sardis 1979, 75).

Bishop Meliton believes that, in addition to the elements mentioned, other typological details can also be identified. These would be the ram, the tree or bush on which the sacrificial animal was placed, and, implicitly, the place where the sacrifice took place. In this case, the ram would refer to the Lamb of God, the tree to the cross, and Mount Moriah to Mount Zion, where Jerusalem is located. Concerning the sacrifice of the two, the Bishop of Sardis notes that one would have had a personal character and the other a universal one. For this reason, Abraham sacrificed the ram that prefigured Christ to pour out the good that resulted from the sacrifice on all mankind, not only on Abraham's descendants (see also St. Ephrem the Syrian 2010, 169). The typological relationship between Isaac and Jesus Christ, expounded by Bishop Meliton in a sufficiently complex manner, mirrors how the Christian communities of his time had received the sacrifice of Isaac (Wood 1968, 583–5).

The interpretations of the other Church Fathers confirm the above statement. If we look more closely at where they came from or where they worked, we will see that it would have been impossible for some to have encountered Bishop Meliton's writings. The Church Fathers in the present research are from Alexandria, Syria, Caesarea, Antioch, Constantinople, Milan, Lyon, Rome, etc. Therefore, their view of the Christological character of Isaac's sacrifice is due to a standard teaching that Christian communities, regardless of the area in which they were located, received from the apostles and their followers.

The Church Fathers, to whom we will refer in what follows, confirm the elements already mentioned; they offer nuances that cast things in a new light, but they also bring new perspectives. For example, Clement of Alexandria in *The Paedagogus*, outlines the typological character of the relationship between Isaac and Christ, using the quality of son that they both possess (1982, 179). Origen considers that both Isaac and the ram prefigure Jesus; the former indicates the divine nature of the Son, the latter the human one. For this reason, Origen argues, and together with him also other interpreters, Isaac

was not offered as a sacrifice, because "the Word *is* not *uncorrupted* (1 Cor 15:42), that is, Christ through His soul does not die, a fact prefigured by Isaac." (*Homilies in Genesis* 8, 9) (Origen 1982, p. 141). A similar interpretation is made by another Alexandrian interpreter, St. Cyril of Alexandria, who identifies Isaac with the Logos, and the ram with His human nature (*Homilae Paschales*, *PG* 77,5) (see also St. Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 94). At the same time, I also note that St. Cyril identifies a new typological element: the quality of *one begotten* of the two (see also St. John Chrysostom 1989, 152). In the case of Isaac, the birth by promise is meant, not the one resulting from the patriarch's union with his wife's handmaid. In addition, he also points out that neither Isaac nor Jesus Christ had any personal guilt that involved a sacrifice of atonement; in the Lord's case, the atonement concerned the sins of all mankind:

> "That is, Isaac's sacrifice is seen as a type of the Savior Christ's sacrifice. And Isaac is one begotten, but also Christ is the Only Begotten. Isaac carries the sacrificial wood on his back, and Christ carries the cross. One ascends Mount Moriah; Christ Jesus ascends the road to Golgotha. Isaac was to be sacrificed without guilt, and so was the Savior crucified without sin. And everyone accepts their own sacrifice." (our translation) (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 94).

In an Easter Homily, the same interpreter identifies a new point of support for the typological relationship: the Father's will. He argues that in both situations, the father/ Father played a decisive role. The one who led the Son to sacrifice was the Father. It goes without saying that in this situation we are not dealing with any trace of coercion (*Homilae Paschales*, *PG* 77,5).

In addition to the elements already mentioned, we still have a few that may serve the objective we have set ourselves, namely, to emphasize the typological/ Christological character of the sacrifice: Wishing to reinforce the typology mentioned, Meliton of Sardis goes beyond the limits of the scriptural text and argues that the sacrifice on Mount Moriah took place before a crowd. He intends to establish an identity with the sacrifice on Golgotha, which was performed in front of everyone (*On Pascha and Fragments* II) (Melito of Sardis 1979, 65). We find a similar situation in St. Ephrem the Syrian, who considers that Sarah also took part in the sacrifice, even though the pericope describing the sacrifice does not refer to this detail (Kessler 2004, 160). Origen argues that the three days Abraham and those who accompanied him spent are reminiscent of the three days

the Lord spent in the tomb before his resurrection (*Homilies in Genesis* 8.4) (Origen 1982, 140). Referring to the sonship of the two, St. John Chrysostom points to a new connecting element, namely that the two are beloved sons (St. John Chrysostom 1989, p. 152). An interpretation used in the second part of the research belongs to Tertullian, who claims that Jesus Christ appeared to Abraham and commanded him to bring Isaac as a sacrifice (*Against Praxeas* 22) (Tertullian 2002, 618). This perspective will be taken up by the mosaicists who represented the sacrifice in the Churches of Monreale and Palermo.

In one of his epistles, St. Cyril of Alexandria refers to the sacrifice of Abraham and gives some pictorial details, suggesting the most suitable manner for its artistic representation:

> "If someone of us desired to see the story of Abraham portrayed in a picture, how would the painter represent him? Would he do it in a single painting showing him doing all the things mentioned, or in successive pictures and distinctively, or in different images, but most often Abraham himself, for example, in one picture sitting on his donkey taking his son along and followed by his servants; in another one, again, with the donkey staying behind down below along with the servants, and Isaac being burdened with the wood while Abraham holds in his hands the knife and the fire; and, indeed, in a different painting, Abraham again in a different pose after he has bound the youth upon the wood and his right hand is armed with a sword in order that he might start the sacrifice? But this would not be a different Abraham each time, although he is seen most of the time in a different pose, but would be the same man in every instance with the skill of the artist continually disposing him according to the needs of the subject matter. For it would not be likely or at any rate probable that one would see him doing all the actions mentioned in a single painting." (*Letter*, 41.22) (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2010, 181)

This text indicates that the episode of the sacrifice, to be captured pictorially, requires several frames; a single frame alone is insufficient to convey the theological message of the key moments surrounding the sacrifice on Moriah. It is possible that St. Cyril here may have consigned a pictorial ensemble in which the hypostases he refers to were represented. This is highly probable. The sacrifice of Isaac had a substantial impact on early Christian communities for its Christological implications.

Elements of typology in Byzantine representations of the sacrifice of Isaac

Before explaining how Byzantine art captures the Christological character of the sacrifice of Isaac, it is appropriate to make a brief foray into the first centuries to note the presence of typological elements in the earliest attempts to represent the sacrifice of Isaac.

Scholars have noted that in the early centuries of Christianity, artistic representations of the sacrifice assumed a symbolic / Christological rather than a literal interpretation. This tendency could also be observed in the Jewish environment. It seems the message the artists wanted to convey was conveyed much better by such a representation. Given the simplicity with which they depicted the sacrifice's details, the Christological element most readily at hand was the sacrifice's wood. As a result, the painters depicted Isaac before the central point of the sacrifice. Thus, we find Isaac in some frescoes, such as the third-century depiction of the Catacomb of Priscilla, carrying the wood on his back (Van Woerden 1961, 214–55; Jensen 1994, 105). Although some have argued that we can speak of a Christological interpretation of this detail only after the Edict of Milan (313), Isaac's carrying of the wood could have been understood in a Christological context even before the Edict. It was easy to see in the previous chapter that the Church Fathers (Meliton of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, Origen) early on saw Isaac carrying the wood as a prefiguration of the moment when Jesus Christ carried His cross. Christian communities were therefore familiar with the typological dimension of sacrifice and could easily make artistic use of this theological message.

The same can be said of the ram in the fresco in the Catacomb of Via Anapo (Rome) dating from the same period. The ram looking towards the patriarch and the wood of the sacrifice placed behind Isaac can be seen as Christological elements. This symbolism was also used in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus in Rome, dating from the beginning of the 3rd century, where the two protagonists of the sacrifice are depicted in a prayerful pose, with a ram, a tree, and the wood of sacrifice beside them (Van Woerden 1961, 222; Kessler, 2004, 157).

The ram and the tree would become an essential detail for the artists depicting the scene on the sarcophagus. Given that Isaac does not appear on the sarcophagus with the wood on his back, it can be said that the artists were not interested in emphasising the Christological character of the sacrifice. Their theological message focused on faith, redemption, and, inevitably, the resurrection. These emphases were because these stone coffins contained people who hoped for the resurrection. Returning to the specificity of

the depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac on a sarcophagus, it should also be noted that the space did not allow the artists to describe a scene narratively or to provide much detail; they focused their attention on a well-defined theological message, which they depicted with simplicity (Kessler 2004, 160). Likewise, the depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac on Eucharistic chalices, such as those preserved in the Museo delle Terme or the Berlin Museum, obviously involves Christological connotations (Smith 1922, 166).

These patterns of representation, specific to Christian catacombs and identifiable with Christological symbolism, were found in Byzantine mosaics and frescoes from the 6th century onwards. For this reason, I argue that the juxtaposition of events in the patriarch's life that are associated with a Christological interpretation is not accidental. One such case is the mosaic in the Church of San Vitale (Ravenna). The scene of Abraham's sacrifice, in which we find all the elements of a typological character (Isaac, the ram, the tree, etc.), is associated with the episode of the Theophany at Mamre. These episodes are indeed representative of the life of the patriarch Abraham, but they are also crucial for Isaac. At the feast under the oak tree, God, who appeared before Abraham in the image of three men (an image prefiguring the Trinity), announced the birth of Isaac. This event, along with the sacrifice on Moriah, has been identified by some of the Church Fathers as the moment to which Jesus Christ refers when he tells the Jews that Abraham saw his day and rejoiced. We do not know for sure whether the mosaicist had this perspective in mind. Most likely, he linked the two events because of their importance, but we cannot rule out a symbolic message behind this association.

Remaining still in the symbolism assumed by the artists of the first centuries, we turn our attention to one of the most important Byzantine representations that support the argumentative approach – the mosaic in the Church of St. Apollinaris, also located in Ravenna. Here, we are dealing with an obvious Christological interpretation. The mosaic places around an Eucharistic table three persons from the Old Testament who have profound Eucharistic/ Christological connotations. The first of these is Melchizedek, who is represented at the top of the table. He is a priest and therefore the officiator of the Eucharistic sacrifice – two loaves of bread and a bowl of wine. His gesture recalls the moment when he greeted Abraham with bread and wine after his victory over that coalition of kings (Chirilă, Pașca-Tușa, and Onețiu 2017, 3-15). In the mosaic mentioned, Abraham is also depicted mystically offering his son. The Patriarch is represented as a loving father who brings Isaac before this Eucharistic supper. On the other side of the table is Abel, holding a lamb in his hands outstretched towards

the altar. His gesture is a reminder of the sacrifice he has offered to God. Melchizedek is a type of Christ, a fact pointed out by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Hebrews (5:5-6.10; 6:20; 7:15-17). Abel is the image of self-sacrifice, the image of the righteous sacrifice which can be, and it is, related to Jesus Christ who was put to death without any guilt being found in him (Mt 23:35; Lk 11:51; Heb 12:24). Therefore, the juxtaposition of the three persons who mystically prefigure Jesus Christ, each in his way, brings out the Christological message that the mosaicist wished to convey. The fact that Isaac is led to the sacrificial table by his father may be a further reason to strengthen the arguments in support of the proposed objective. I recall that the Church Fathers also highlight the role of the father/Father in the realization of this sacrifice: he brings to the sacrifice his firstborn son/the Only Begotten, whom he loves completely. Because of this love, the son makes himself obedient to the will of his father and does not resist the sacrifice he is about to make.

In the same period (6th century) we can identify another representation containing an obvious Christological message. The miniature by Cosmas Indicopleustes, a monk from Alexandria who had previously been a Greek merchant, depicts Isaac in a pose like that of Jesus Christ as he carries his cross to Calvary. The way Isaac is described with the wood on his back suggests that the author intended to emphasize the typological character of his miniature (Van Woerden 1961, 230). It is therefore easy to see that the artists who emphasised the Christological content of the sacrifice of Isaac depicted him with the wood on his back. This perspective does not exclude the other typological elements, but the image of carrying the wood on his back allowed a quick association between Isaac and Jesus Christ.

Interest in the representation of Abraham's sacrifice reappeared in the 12th century, especially in Italy and Sicily, places where many mosaicists from Constantinople promoted the values of Byzantine art (Delvoye 1967, 91–2; Munteanu 2011, 138). Thus, the mosaics in the Palatine Chapel of Palermo (12th century) and the Cathedral of Monreale (Sicily – 12th century) are representative of the marking of this new stage of artistic rendering of the sacrifice of Isaac. Until then, artists had emphasised the symbolic and Christological nature of the sacrifice. From the Middle Ages onwards, there was a tendency to render the scriptural text depicting the sacrifice as faithfully as possible. The scene of the sacrifice was given a more generous rendering space. This made it possible to show several moments of the event on Mount Moriah. Thus, in the two mosaics, two stages are represented: the receiving of the commandment and the

climax of the sacrifice. I mentioned in the first part of the paper that Tertullian was recording a particular reality: The one who gave the commandment to Abraham was the Savior himself. This fact is captured in both mosaics. The Lord Jesus Christ replaces the hand of the Lord, which symbolically marked God's presence. This detail, which refers to a Christological interpretation of the event, is supported by two other elements in the Palatine Chapel mosaic that are typologically related: the wood on the altar, placed crosswise, and the ram. The placing of Isaac on the wood arranged in the form of a cross and the presence of the Savior in the first frame provide sufficient reason to believe that the author wished to emphasize the Christological dimension of this sacrifice.

The two great schools of painting, the Macedonian and the Cretan, placed a strong emphasis on depicting the climax of the sacrifice, the moment when Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac. The relationship between father and son captured the painters' attention. The father's turmoil, coupled with a calmness born of his faith in God and his son's perfect obedience to his father, is evident in the depictions from Gračanica in Serbia (now Kosovo) – 14th century, Stavronikita, and St. Dionysius (16th century). In the first chapter, we noted that the Church Fathers emphasised the typological dimension of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, which mirrors the perfect love of the Father and the obedience of the Son to the point of death on the cross. This boundless love the patriarch has for his beloved son is therefore the key to understanding the climax of the sacrifice, in which we find no trace of violence. The manner of perfecting the ritual of slaughter, even if it might arouse a certain repulsion on the part of the one contemplating this scene, does not in any way change the love of the father for the son who is to be sacrificed with his own hands (Pentiuc 2019, 347). The Church Fathers imagine a dialogue between God and Abraham in which the former reveals to the Patriarch that what he had accomplished silently on the mountain, he will achieve in a real way at the due time on Calvary. Thus, parental love, the son's obedience, and the sacrifice itself are typological realities that are implied in any representation of sacrifice (Pașca-Tușa 2021, 68–9).

Of the three frescoes mentioned, the most extensive in both space and the number of scenes is the one from the Monastery of St. Dionysius. The author narrates the main moments of the sacrifice, beginning with the reception of the commandment, continuing with the journey with the servants, then the ascent of the mountain, the carrying of the wood on the back, and ending with the actual sacrifice. The elements that have a Christological connotation are the red garment and the binding of the wood

of sacrifice with a rope. Within the same typological framework, the scene of the two of them going up the mountain can also be included, suggesting a dialogue between them about the sacrificial sheep. The text written above the scene indicates this discussion.

The model promoted by Theophan the Greek at Stavronikita and later continued by his disciple Zorzis at Saint Dionysius was to be generalised throughout Eastern Christianity (Ștefănescu 1973, 78). Where space permitted, the painters could opt for one or more of the frames mentioned at the Monastery of St. Dionysius. Gradually, the scene of the sacrifice was introduced into the apse of the altar at the Proskomedia table, along with other sacrifices that in a mystical way prefigured or referred to the supreme sacrifice on the cross (Dionysius of Fourna 2000, 234). With its introduction into the altar's iconographic plan, the typological/Christological dimension of the sacrifice was enshrined. Its prefigurative character could no longer be doubted. The representation of the central point of the sacrifice was sufficient to emphasize typology, without the need for another element of a typological character (I am referring here to the carrying of the wood on the back or to the ram).

Conclusions

With the Savior's words about the sacrifice of Isaac (Jn 8:56) as a point of reference, the Church Fathers began to search the Old Testament text describing the sacrifice (Gn 22) for elements that could support the association between the two events. Thus, they identified the following points of connection: Isaac's carrying the wood of the sacrifice on his shoulders; his taking up the sacrifice without any opposition; his perfect obedience to his father; his awareness of the sacrifice; his guiltlessness; the binding of his hands and feet before the sacrifice; his quality of only begotten son; his status as a beloved son; the ram; the branches of the tree in which he was caught; the high place chosen by God for the sacrifice. To these typological elements, the Church Fathers added others (even at the risk of moving away from the realities described in the scriptural text) to make the association between the two events as apparent as possible.

The interpretation of the Church Fathers was gradually taken up in Christian art. The painters, mosaicists, miniaturists, and iconographers sought to record and convey a message already known to the Christian community. To emphasise the Christological character of the sacrifice, Christian artists used several types of representation to convey this typological message. The most apparent Christological reference was the representation of Isaac with the wood on his back. This pictorial detail implied an

instant correlation with Jesus carrying the cross to the Place of the Skull. The ram and the bush (tree) are the other Christological elements that the artists used to establish the typology.

By including the sacrifice of Isaac in the apse iconography of the altar, around the Proskomidia table, the typological/Christological character of the sacrifice was confirmed. Isaac was a type of Christ, and his sacrifice was a prefiguration of the sacrifice on the cross.

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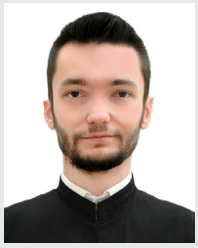
Jacob Wrestles at Peniel – The confrontation between the "God-Man" and the "man-god" (Gn 32:24-25)

Abstract

The study analyses the fragment from Genesis 32, 24-25, highlighting the spiritual and theological significance of the encounter between Jacob and the "man" who turns out to be God. Through a detailed exegetical approach, the work discerns the narrative's complexity, emphasizing the broader context in which this confrontation is situated. The struggle symbolizes not only a physical confrontation, but also a spiritual journey, as Jacob is challenged to recognize his weaknesses and dependence on God. The study interprets the transcendent side of the encounter, in which the anonymized identification of the "man" emphasizes the fact that divinity has chosen to make itself accessible to man. The struggle becomes a means through which Jacob transforms his identity, moving from self-sufficiency to a profound recognition of his need for divine help. Thus, exegetical observations on the meanings of paronymic words and the connections between the name Jacob and the Jabbok River are explored to highlight the interdependence between man and God. In conclusion, the study suggests that this biblical experience is relevant to meeting contemporary challenges, urging readers to reflect on their own spiritual quest and their relationship with divinity, highlighting that true strength and inner peace derive from accepting dependence on God.



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Keywords
Jacob, Struggle, God, Addiction, Transformation

Prolegomena

The fragment of Genesis 32:24-32, subjected to exegetical analysis, has, since ancient times, given rise to profound theological exegesis, most of which rests on the thesis that the narrative must be understood as a derivative of the additions relating to some verses in this textual structure. We do not intend to analyse this debate; we only note that most exegetes, including HJ Hermisson (1974, 239-261) and A. de Pury (1979, 18-34), consider verse 33 in the BHS version to have been added later. A growing number of commentators, including P. Volz (Volz 1933, 63), say the same about verses 28 and 29, because, like verse 33, these verses also speak of Israel. Some also consider verse 31b secondary because it does not fit the narrative thread. At the same time, other scholars, such as E. Otto (Otto 1979, 24-158) and G. Hentschel (Hentschel 1977, 13-37), argue that verse 26, or at least verse 26b, is also secondary, being the verse that has so far raised the most significant difficulties for exegetes. However, there are still no sufficiently solid arguments to support these views. In this sense, it is concluded that the remaining verses, namely 23-26a, 27, 30, 31a, and 32 (BHS), provide a self-contained, intelligible narrative (Westermann 1985, 514).

The exposition of the narrative, whose action begins in verse 24 [25], consists of an itinerary note that aligns with the story's character as a traveller's experience. If the exposition is read without verse 23a [24a], it appears as a unit and contains the following elements: chronological note, initially autonomous and independent of the narrative that follows; Jacob crosses the ford with his entourage and his belongings (the family and possessions are mentioned only here). The repetition of verse 22 [23] in verse 23a [24a] should be understood as a connection between the itinerary and the following narrative (Westermann 1985, 515-6).

Even if the theme of our scriptural episode is the struggle, an aspect that no exegete disputes, in this exegetical approach we cannot isolate this Old Testament passage from the context of the entire cycle of episodes that are directly related to Jacob, especially since this connection and formal similarity is automatically proven by the wordplay that appears in the scene: יַעֲקֹב (*ya'aqōḇ*/ Jacob) – the man, יַבֹּק (*yabbōq*/Iaboc) – the location and אָבַק [*abaq* – "to fight" (*yē'āḇēq*)] – the action, the consonant pattern being *y'qb/ybq/y'bq* (verses 24 and 25). Thus, these paronymous words (very similar in form and phonetics) attract the reader's attention. As a result, for Jacob to be able to cross the Jabbok to the blessed land, he must struggle. Regarding this aspect, Fokkelman states that the grabbing of his brother Esau by the heel *`qb* led Jacob to endure an extreme

consequence: the struggle *'bq* with a *man*, which will make him live the most intense experience of his life, as is evident from the fact that once this is consumed, Jacob will live on under a changed name (Skolnik and Berenbaum 2007, 19), as a new being, and under this name he will become the patriarch of the "Israelites" (Fokkelman 1975, 210).

Although it is relatively short, the passage we wish to analyse (Gn 32:24-25) is highly concentrated and rich in spiritual teachings. Still, it is, to the same extent, also very ambiguous and, due to the lack of details, raises many questions, which is why our analysis aims to be illuminating, especially since there is increasing talk about how man can see God and, of course, whether this is possible during earthly life. The study will explore the transcendent encounter between the human and the divine, emphasizing the fact that Jacob, through struggle, recognizes his dependence on God. We will highlight the symbolism of struggle, which responds to Jacob's fears and becomes a path to spiritual transformation. The primary teaching emerges from the awareness that man needs his God, not the other way around, highlighting the importance of faith and divine acceptance. Through a detailed exegetical analysis, the text combines elements of theology, spirituality, and anthropology, inviting the reader to reflect on their own dependence on divinity amid inner struggle and the search for the meaning of life.

The transcendent encounter between the human and the divine

The story of the encounter begins, according to the NIV and TEV, with the phrase "So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day" (Gn 32:24) [1]. Thus, the textual structure "a man wrestled with him" [2] suggests that the "man" (that Someone) was the one who initiated the attack, the one who took Jacob by surprise, so that the anonymous qualification "a man" renders the mysterious identity of this person, no one knowing who he is, not even Jacob himself, at an initial stage, a fact that suggests the transcendent nature of this man. Jacob will identify him with God (Gn 32:30 [31]), a connection the prophet Hosea will later make (Hos 12:3-4). The simple qualification of "man" [3] is a means of emphasizing his human individuality and functions as a contrast to divinity (Gn 32:28 [29]; Is 2:11, 17; Nm 23:19; Hos 11:9), the same language being used by Isaiah in his description of the suffering Servant – the Messiah (Is 53:3). Also, the fact that God takes human form to meet people is not unheard of (Gn 18:1, 17; Jgs 6:11; 13:3). The same term, "man" (אִישׁ – *'ish*) [4], is used by Daniel to designate the "heavenly High Priest" (Dn 10:5) and the "commander of the army" [שַׂר הַצָּבָא – *sar hatsaba* – (Dn 8:11)], an expression that denotes the

Lord Himself (Jo 5:14-15). Thus, it is not unusual for supernatural beings in the Old Testament to take on human form (Hamilton 1995, 330).

It is therefore not surprising that rabbinical interpretations identified the "man" who wrestles with Jacob with the awaited Messiah and High Priest who "serves" in heavenly Zion. In the same sense, the Christian tradition identified this "Angel" with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, according to other scriptural versions (Doukhan 2016, 372).

> "In Genesis 31:13 Malach-Yahweh, whom Jacob saw in his sleep, was called the God of Bethel (El Bethel), because Yahweh had also appeared to Jacob at Bethel (Gn 28:11). The unknown with whom Jacob wrestles all night and who before the break of dawn reveals himself to him as God, is called Malach-Yahweh by Hos 12:4" (our translation) (Negoiță 2004, 84).

Thus, "the biblical text tells us about a person with a dual nature: human and God" (Comănescu 2009, 33). In this same sense, St. Ambrose of Milan states:

> "And what else would it mean to fight with God, then to set out to fight on the path of virtue, to open the fight with someone stronger than you, and to make yourself better in all respects, resembling God? And since his faith and piety were invincible, the Lord made him understand the hidden mysteries by touching the joint of his thigh, showing him thereby that the Lord Jesus would have to rise by birth from a virgin, a thing that is neither inappropriate nor unworthy of God, a fact that was shown in an ineffable way by the cross on the joint of his thigh, which will mean the outpouring of salvation and forgiveness of sins for all those who share, through the numbness and sleep of the body, in the resurrection from the dead. Therefore, it was not unjustly that the sun rose from the right of Jacob, from the tribe of from which the saving cross of the Lord would shine, from where the Sun of righteousness would also rise, through which we understand God Himself, because He alone is the eternal light." (our translation) (Sf. Ambrozie al Milanului 2007, 280-1)

We also see in the text of Holy Scripture that "the man" [5] is the one who fights, because nothing is mentioned about the response of Jacob, who must certainly have been overwhelmed by the attack and completely unprepared, especially since the fight takes place at night, which is why "solitude and darkness are, in themselves, imprints of a divine presence. Jacob is chosen to perform an important ritual, a kind

of baptism; a man's name is the expression of his being, and his change is equivalent to a transfiguration" (Pleșu 2003, 238). In the light of Saint Gregory of Nyssa's teaching, we can observe that authentic knowledge of God takes place in darkness, not in light. This emphasizes that man's struggle with God represents one of the most important steps he can take towards divinity. In this struggle, man can communicate directly with God to ask Him questions and receive answers. Night and darkness are considered the ideal environments for practicing spirituality, for introspection (Ps 4:4), meditation (Ps 63:4) and prayer (Lk 6:12). In moments of solitude, the human soul opens and allows the dialogue with God to become deeper and more authentic (Ps 77:6; Dn 10:8; Jn 16:32) (Spence-Jones 2004, 395). On the other hand, Rabbi Luria states that night is the propitious time for spiritual ascents to heaven (Moshe 2008, 83). Then, the aspect that attracts attention is that this "confrontation", this "fight" to deserve our sight, is initiated by God Himself. Why do we affirm this? Because God awaits Jacob, he challenges him. He prepared this fight, knowing that it is the most significant test, in which lies the condition of remaining definitively with Him or of moving away forever. Jacob did not avoid this confrontation but stayed there, having the courage to fight [6].

We thus see that the time of the fight (night) has a bivalent meaning. On the one hand, the fact that the "adversary" wanted to leave at dawn shows that the night visit was part of a plan, because if he had come during the day he would have been recognized by Jacob as an authority (v. 29) and as a specific identity (v. 30b), which is why if Jacob had known with whom he was going to fight he would not have initiated this fight nor would he have engaged in it so fiercely. On the other hand, the duration of the fight until dawn suggests a long and hesitant/indecisive confrontation, the "attacker" resorting to something extraordinary (Von Rad 1972, 320). Therefore, the climax of the long struggle becomes clear: after a long and hesitant struggle, the "man" "touched" Jacob [7].

The symbolic meanings of Jacob's confrontation with God

Verse 25 ("But when he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh [8] and dislocated the socket of Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him") reveals that the Lord had injured Jacob's hip, making him lame [9] from that moment on. God's "weakness" in His "confrontation" with men is an expression of His grace and love, but also of the mystery of His incarnation to reach men and save them. This impression of weakness is immediately contradicted by the next movement of the

"man": he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh [10] and dislocated his hip. Thus, a simple touch was enough to cause the dislocation, suggesting superhuman power (Curtis 1987, 134).

Also, the location of the blow, namely the "hip joint/groin of the thigh" (כַּף יְרֵכוֹ – *kap yerēḵa*) of Jacob, was not chosen by chance. The Hebrew word for "hip" (יָרֵךְ – *yerek*) refers to the thigh (Gn 24:9; 47:29) and is identified with "the general area of the body which constitutes the seat of procreative power" [11], that is, with the genital area ("hip") (Smith 1990, 468; Geller 1982, 52). In Holy Scripture, according to Saint Cyril of Alexandria, the thighs are "the parts of the body necessary for the birth of children and therefore, the birth itself. For between the thighs are for all the members necessary for the birth of children" [12]. The divine touch is, in this way, an implicit blessing that refers to the descendants/offspring of Jacob (Gn 46:26; Ex 1:5). Therefore, since the term כַּף־ (*kap-*) connotes the idea of a hole/hollowness in something, and יָרֵךְ (*yārēḵ*) can mean "intimate area," it is possible that the כַּפְיְרֵכוֹ (*kapʸrēḵô*) to refer to the male genital area rather than to a part of the hip [13]. Given the references to "hips" in patriarchal traditions, it is inconceivable that later Israelites would not have taken up the national meaning of the verse, namely that Jacob, the ancestor of Israel, had his hip struck and from this hip came the later Israel (Doukhan 2016, 373) [14]. At the same time, the writer Josephus Flavius in his work "Antiquities of the Jews" writes that after all those in Jacob's entourage crossed the river called Iabacchus, Jacob remained a little behind, and fought with an "incarnation", which he defeated and which

> "urged him to rejoice in what had happened and not to imagine that he had fought with an insignificant opponent, his defeated being the angel of the Lord. This meant for him a foreshadowing of great luck, for his race would never die out and no mortal would ever surpass his powers" (our translation) (Josephus Flavius 1999, 60).

We want to point out that the tendency of modern translations to interpret the verb "touched" from the structure "And he touched his thigh (וַיִּגַּע בְּכַפְיְרֵכוֹ – *way·yig·ga'be·ḵap̄ yerêḵōv*) with "hit" (נָגַע – *nāga'*) is unjustified, being influenced either by the context or by the nouns נֶגַעָה (*negʿa*) and נִגְעוֹ (*nigʿe*), which means "pain/suffering," "helplessness" or "wound/injury" (Geller 1982, 52), but the verb נָגַע (*nagʿa*) in the Qal conjugation always means "to touch" [15], possibly "to barely touch" and only in the Piel conjugation can it mean "to wound," "to torment" or "to do harm" (Acts 26:11;

Jo 9:19) (Alter 1998, 97). This duality of meaning mirrors the ancient understanding of holiness, the primary attribute of divinity. God is the source of all blessings and the energy of life, but for man, as a created being, closeness to the One who is can be critical ("Man cannot see My face and live"). The ambiguity of *nāgaʿ* in this passage reflects the dynamics of holiness, since it is no coincidence that this term plays a central role in the ancient strategy of entering into contact with the divinity, since, without a special spiritual preparation, this can be fatal, God being the One who punishes those who disregard His holiness (Uzza, Nadab, Abiud, etc.). In the case of Israel, the duality of holiness forms the basis of a tension that permeates the entire biblical thought. It finds its explanation in both the blessings and the curses of the covenant. The "danger" of being God's chosen one is also at the basis of the prophetic message: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities!" (Am 3:2) (Geller 1982, 55) [16].

Touching Jacob's hip led to the "dislocation" (וַתֵּקַע – *wattēqa'*) of it (יָרֵךְ – *yārēk*). The Hiphil root *yāqa'* highlights a kind of public act of execution committed on living bodies (Nm 25:4; 2 Kgs 21:6.9.13), while the Qal root, present in our text, means "separation/alienation/breaking/dislocation" (Polzin 1969, 233).

Analysing the original Hebrew text, we could notice a difference in the translation into Romanian, compared to the original version (BHS), in the sense that in the Hebrew original the character of the confrontation, the "struggle" between Jacob and God is shown more clearly through the term אבק, which refers to a hand-to-hand combat sport between two (unarmed) people who try to knock each other to the ground with their arms (Achtemeier 1985, 1147), which denotes the fact that this fight must be understood more as a competition, a contest between man and God, a confrontation in which the aim is not to destroy or injure the opponent, but to train him, to strive to become better and not give in so easily; we are basically talking about a fight that aims to perfect the opponent and at the same time motivate him to win the big prize.

This root "to fight" (אָבַק – *abaq*) is found only here, in these two verses of the Bible (Gn 32:24-25) and seems to evoke the name of the river "Jabbok phonetically" (יַבֹּק – *yabbōq*) and of Jacob himself (יַעֲקֹב – *ya·ʿă·qōḇ*). The toponymy and the events seem phonetically united, so that the river becomes "the place of the heel-catcher's fight" (Lizorkin-Eysenberg 2019, 56).

Also, the Hebrew term "struggle" (אבק – *abaq*) and implicitly the denominative verb *'bq* "to struggle" in verses 24 and 25 are related to the word "dust," "dusts"

(אָבַק – *ʿā·ḇêq*) – Dt 28:24; Ez 26:10 – [17], perhaps suggesting that hand-to-hand combat involves falling into the "dust" and getting dirty (Hamilton 1995, 329), as two people do when they fight on the ground or try to throw each other to the ground, an aspect that highlights the dynamics of the fight and the rolling in the dust, the dust being what blurred the vision of the One Who wished to remain invisible. Thus, Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak), explaining the term "fight" (אבק – *abaq*), states that it was so intense that a "cloud of dust" (וַיִּוָּתֵר – *way·yê·ʾā·ḇêq*) enveloped them while they were fighting (Kimhi 1842, 107). In societies where such contests are unknown, a descriptive phrase should be used, for example, "he and Jacob tried to push each other" (Reyburn and Fry 1997, 763).

Also in this sense, Rabbi Rashi, referring to the fight between the two, states that Menachem (ben Seruk) explains the meaning of the verb "to fight" in the form: *vayei'aveik* ("a man covered himself with dust"), using its connection with the term אָבָק (*dust*) from which it is derived, which would mean that by their movements they were kicking up dust with their feet. However, Rashi, like Ramban, believes that it means "he clung/clung/attached to it," being an Aramaic word, as it appears in Sanhedrin 63b [אֲבָיְקוּ (*aviku*) – "after it had joined/attached itself"] and in Menahot 42a ("and it was woven together like fringes or loops or more precisely like tassels – Nm 15:38"). Denotes "weaving", because this is the way in which two people make strong efforts to throw each other to the ground, by one grabbing the other and "weaving" around him with his arms, the rabbis seeing in Jacob's opponent the guardian angel of Esau (*Genesis Rabbah* 77:3) (Rashi 1999, 325; Ramban 2004, 146).

In rabbinic language, "avikah" is often used to convey the meaning of "chavikah" (*loop*). Similarly, the word *avukah* is so called in rabbinical expression because it is made from small pieces of wood tied and glued together. This is because the letter cheth is difficult to pronounce in Hebrew, and so they used the aleph for more straightforward pronunciation. Thus, it is possible that the term וַיֵּאָבֵק (*way·yê·ʾā·ḇêq*) to be in fact וַיְחַבְּקֵהוּ (*way·ḥab·be·qê·hū*), as "and embraced him" (וַיְחַבֵּק – *way·ḥab·beq*), because perhaps this is the way to exchange between א (aleph) and ח (cheth), in Hebrew (Rashi 1999, 334). Spurrell also suggests that the action verb may be related to the term "embrace" (חָבַק – *ḥāḇaq*) or it may be a dialectical variant of it, for the sake of wordplay (Spurrell 1906, 282). Hamilton also speaks in this sense, suggesting that there is a connection between the *'bq* in this passage and the *ḥāḇaq* in Genesis 33:4. Thus, in chapter 32 it appears: a man "struggles" (אָבַק – *ʾāḇaq*) with Jacob (embrace/

clasp in battle), and in chapter 33 Esau "embrace" him (חַבְּקֵ֥הוּ – *ḥāḇaq*) on Jacob (hug/greeting/form of greeting), the two similar verbs being chosen, in this way, to describe the beginning of Jacob's meetings (Hamilton 1995, 329).

In turn, Martin-Achard emphasizes that this very rare verb was also chosen for the assonance created between "Jaboc" (יַבֹּ֔ק – *yabbōq*) and "Jacob" (יַעֲקֹ֖ב – *ya·ʿă·qōḇ*) the sounds b/v and k/q forming alliterations pronounced at the beginning of this episode (Martin-Achard 1974, 60), the verb introducing a phonetic play through the name of the river Jabbok (יַבֹּ֔ק), similar to Jacob (יַעֲקֹ֖ב) and meaning "tumultuous, winding" river (Gunkel 1997, 326), this play on words, thus using the name of the river as an eternal reminder of the most important event that took place there (Ross 1985, 344).

Mark Smith, referring to the verb "to fight," suggests that it may be another form of *'pq*, which appears in the Hithpael or Dt variant [18] and means "to constrain," "to control oneself/to control oneself" (Gn 43:31; 45:1). Smith emphasizes the use of the root *'pq* in the context of El and Yamm's plans to attack Baal (Smith 1994, 58-107) and proposes that the niphal of *'bq* in Gn 32:25 could similarly mean "to be caught, detained" (Smith 2002, 640–641; Grabbe 1979, 307-314). Even though Smith's argument seems quite convincing, it is difficult to explain, in this sense, the use of the preposition "with" (עִם־ – *ʿim*), which follows the verb in both verses 24 [25] (וַיֵּאָבֵ֥ק אִישׁ עִמּ֖וֹ – *wayyēʾāḇēq ʾîš ʿimmo*) and 25(26) (בְּהֵאָבְקֹ֥ו עִמּ֖וֹ – *bĕhēʾāḇĕqô ʿimmô*) (Hamori 2008, 97).

Although the struggle, in general, involves a character of rebellion, hatred, anger, in the present situation this clash with God generates tranquillity and peace in the soul, because it is an assurance of the fact that God is with man in every difficult circumstance of his life and all he has to do is to stay in the fight and hold on tightly to God, so as not to fall and get seriously injured. This clash desired by God with man is another way of telling him that he has the duty to keep Him close to his soul, so as not to get lost in the tumult of this worldly world, which is in free fall, as a result of advanced moral decadence, because this clash is nothing more than a perfection of the technique of remaining in balance, just like in sports, being the art of resisting as long as possible and not unbalancing ourselves from a spiritual point of view. In this sense, God's clash with man represents a grappling confrontation, each striving to hinder or knock down their "opponent," or to unbalance them (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 2003, 1146).

Spiritual transformation in the confrontation at Peniel

In the battle, God wants to show Jacob that it is not He who needs his recognition as God, but he, the man, needs God; from that moment on, he becomes God's "lame," dependent on God. It is very interesting to note that the battle is a direct answer to Jacob's prayer, because while he was on his way to his brother Esau, with his wives, children and all his wealth, he lost the strength of his faith, his only thought being what his brother would do to him for stealing the blessing of their father, Isaac [19]. As a result, God wants to show him, through the battle, that He will offer him His help. Still, at the same time, He had to teach him the last lesson, namely, that of overcoming the human fear inherent in human nature through total faith in Him, who gives courage, tranquillity, and peace to the soul of man.

> "Great is the Lord's love for people! Because Jacob was going to meet Esau, God allowed him to wrestle with Jacob in the form of a man, so that he might know through deeds that he would not suffer any harm. All this was done with humility, to drive away the fear from Jacob's soul and to convince him not to be afraid of meeting his brother." (Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur 1989, 249).

Thus, it is not the fear of death that should terrify man, but the fear of losing God from the soul, when man's thought focuses on other things, which belong strictly to the sphere of immanence. The best prayer comes from a strong inner necessity (MacDonald and Farstad 1997, 57).

On the other hand, analysing Jewish interpretations, we noticed that Jewish scholars speculated that Jacob was not only terrified of his own death, but was also ready to kill in turn. Let us remember the fear of Rebekah, the mother of the two, that if they had met, they would probably have killed each other. In this sense, Rabbi Judah bar Ilai states that aren't fear and terror the same thing? The meaning is, however, that he "feared" that he would be killed; "he was terrified" that he would have to kill. Because Jacob thought: If he submits me, will he not kill me; and if I submit him, will I not kill him? This is the meaning of "he feared" – lest he be killed and "he was terrified" – lest he kill in turn (Sacks 2009, 218).

Self-sufficiency is incompatible with God's work in any age. Faith alone overwhelms the world (Walvoord and Zuck 1983, 180). Jacob knew that God had chosen him over his brother. Still, he forgot to let God direct his own life to fulfil His plan for him. Still, he

wanted to do these deeds in God's place, actions that brought him suffering, by drawing the wrath of his brother, the anger of his father whom he had deceived, the sadness of his mother, because he had gone far from his family, and the weight of his life, as one who had to leave his birthplace, family, friends, to go alone to an unknown region, where he worked as a slave for his uncle for 20 years. However, the alienation from family and country also had a benefit, namely, his closeness to God. In a theophanic scene, the protagonist's isolation from family and others is crucial. Loneliness becomes an absolute necessity for encountering the All, in contrast to the divine appearance amid humanity (Savran 2005, 14).

From that moment on, the All-Powerful did nothing but show him that He would always be close to him, if he believed in Him and at the same time trusted in His plans for him, without trying to rush them, change them, or fulfil them alone. If he had put his trust only in God, he most likely would not have suffered any of the things he had to go through until returning to his homeland. Thus, during that thump, he became aware of his guilt because only the presence of God in a person's life is sufficient to recognize the mistake and produce correction through repentance. That was the moment when God, by touching his hip and dislocating it, showed him His power to lose him in an instant. Still, according to the prophet Ezekiel, "God does not desire the death of the sinner, but that he turn and live" (Ez 33:11). That was the moment when Jacob completely shifted the focus from himself to the Living God, making Him the centre of his existence. For Jacob, it was amazing that his "adversary" could dislocate or numb his hip just by touching it (Gn 32:32) [20].

Very often, our life resembles that of Jacob, especially in situations where human worries make us forget the God of heaven and earth. Therefore, solitude offers an intimate setting conducive to the revelatory action in which the God-Man communicates himself perfectly to the human element, which opens its soul like a flower that must shine in the sunlight and share the intoxicating scent of bodily and spiritual purity and cleanliness. In the context of the solitary environment, man can return to himself, to make a rigorous analysis of his conscience and to think of God as the last hope or way of escape. The journey home for Jacob was the cruellest moment because only then did he realize that everything he had and had acquired through hard work throughout his life could be lost in an instant, and that is why, in his despair, he clung to his last bargain, reminding God that He had promised to bring him home safely. That is why it was so crucial for him to receive the blessing from the One with whom he had wrestled,

because the blessing was like a guarantee for him that God would not let him lose. God's blessing was a guarantee of his life and his family members' lives because it implies the direct presence of God. Only when he was wrestling with God did he receive the peace he needed in his soul, realizing that the centre of life is not biological life itself but God Himself, the Living Source of eternal life.

> "Jacob was aware of the One with whom he was contending, and, believing that His power, though far superior to human power, was limited by His promise to do him good, he determined not to lose the opportunity of securing a blessing. And nothing pleases God more than to see the hearts of His people turned to Him." (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown 1997, Gn 32:26)

Conclusions

The study highlights the profound significance and complexity of the encounter between Jacob and the mysterious "man" who turns out to be God. In the exegetical analysis of Genesis 32, 24-25, it is confirmed that the struggle, although initiated by the divinity, becomes a means by which Jacob becomes aware of his fragility and dependence on God. This confrontation symbolizes an essential transformation, Jacob moving from a state of self-sufficiency to recognizing his need for the divinity, thus becoming God's "lame one."

The struggle is not just a simple physical competition, but a spiritual ritual, in which Jacob shapes his identity and becomes the patriarch of Israel. It also highlights the duality of the divine nature, which, through apparent weakness, fulfils a deeper purpose: that of offering man the opportunity to approach divinity.

This nocturnal encounter is also a metaphor for the challenges of life, where fears and insecurities are confronted through faith. Finally, the study invites readers to reflect on their own spiritual quest, suggesting that true strength and peace come from recognizing dependence on God, correlating biblical experience with contemporary challenges to faith.

Notes

[1] "Ad alot ha-shachar" (until the dawn) means until the darkness of the night has disappeared. Others say that *shachar* (dawn) refers to the image of light appearing in the clouds before sunrise. (Ibn Ezra, 1988, 317).

[2] This means that the fight is an attack, like the attack of a robber or a murderer, and

the victim is defenceless and taken by surprise. Such an assault on one who is helpless and unsuspecting is a deliberate tactic, calculated to make everything easy. This aspect, prominent, is mostly not considered. This is not a fight in which "strength meets strength" and to which the two parties have agreed (Westermann 1985, 516).

[3] The term appears in this text אִישׁ (*man*), which is also used in Jo 5:13, where an angel is referred to, and in Dn 9:21, where it relates to the angel Gabriel, described as אִישׁ (*man*) par excellence. The reason why these angels are called אִישׁ is that they appear to people to whom they speak in human form. The types of angels who speak to man are called אִישׁ, because they occur either in a vision or while the person to whom they are shown is fully conscious, awake (Kimhi 1842, 85).

[4] The Hebrew word "ish" has its etymology in the term "enoș" (man, mortal), in the Septuagint, the corresponding one being *ἄνθρωπος* (*man*). (Comănescu 2009, 33)

[5] Israel rejected submission to the Savior Christ, who appeared in human form, because it did not believe that divinity could take on human form. It did not recognize in this human manifestation the greatness of God incarnate forever. This lack of faith was due to the habit acquired by Israel through the law of Sinai, which had taught them not to submit to man, considering that God could not take human form, because it would be contrary to His greatness. Only at the end of the long night of history, when it will find that it cannot defeat the Man-Christ and when it will understand that humanity can be raised to the level of being the means through which God acts, will Israel receive Christ and ask for His blessing. Until then, it will continue to fight with God, refusing to be defeated by Christ. Stăniloae (n. 300) in (Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, 1992, 180).

[6] His Herculean strength was also highlighted in Gn 29:10, when he rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered Laban's sheep. (Hamilton 1995, 330). In the battle with the All, "which is called faith, God Himself stands by us. God demands, challenges, oppresses, and supports us, in a single saving embrace." (Pleșu 2003, 241).

[7] He who was expected to be unfair in his struggle with others met an "attacker" himself, who crippled him with a supernatural blow. In other words, like so many of his rivals before him, Jacob encountered a situation that caught him completely unprepared (Ross 1985, 344-5).

[8] The textual structure "touched the joint of his thigh" (וַיִּגַּ֥ע בְּכַף־יְרֵכֹ֖ו – *way·yig·ga' be·ḵap̄·yerêḵōv*) emphasizes that by this touch God made him understand that, although Esau would not be able to defeat him, the danger would come from another place, in another context, namely one of his own children who would cause him pain. The reference was to his daughter, whom an uncircumcised nation would rape. This is why he wounded the joint of his thigh, the word "thigh" (כַּף־ – *kap̄-*) being feminine.

Jacob understood all this from what the angel had done, but he did not understand how this hint applied to his daughter until the incident with Shechem (Gn 34) (Kimhi 1842, 154).

[9] Jacob's limp is lasting evidence of the reality of the struggle; this is the most lucid of all, a sign that the battle was not a dream. (Kidner 1967, 204).

[10] "Unable" to defeat Jacob by force, the Angel strikes him with a sudden and powerful blow around the hip socket, that is, the acetabulum (the cavity of the iliac bone in which the head of the femur articulates) (Sarna 1989, 227).

[11] Stephen A. Geller shows that "touching the thigh" may mark the end of the race of those born of the patriarch's seed (Geller 1982, 50; Westermann 1985, 520).

[12] "Therefore, when blessed Abraham sent his faithful servant to Mesopotamia to take a wife for Isaac, he commanded him to swear, saying: 'Put your hand on my thigh,' that is, swear by God and by those who will come from me and by the birth of your master. So, the thigh indicates those in the thigh." (Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei 1992, 181).

[13] The fight between the "man" and Jacob thus becomes a confrontation in which at some point the "man" touches/hits Jacob in the private area, a situation comparable to that mentioned in Dt 25:11-12, which speaks of a fight between two men, a fight in which the wife of the loser demotes the winner by grabbing him by the "private parts" (RSV) (Gervitz 1975, 52-3; Smith 1990, 466-9).

[14] The Rabbis stated in *Bereshit Rabba* 77:4 that God touched all the righteous who were to be born of Jacob, a statement referring to the generation of religious persecution during the time of Hadrian. The purpose of this Midrash is thus to show that the entire event constitutes an indication for future generations, emphasizing that there will be a generation of the seed of Jacob against whom Esau [Rome] will prevail to the point of near eradication or extermination. This happened to the generation of Rabbi Yehudah ben Baba and his companions during the period of the sages of the Mishnah (Ramban 2004, 161).

[15] Westermann, for example, argues that it cannot mean "strike" and refers to "a kind of magical touch." (Westermann 1985, 517).

[16] The Hebrew word for struck is *nāga' be*. In many cases it is sufficient to translate it as "touched," with the first use of *nāga'* in Acts 3:3 being identified with the meaning "to touch," the other passages suggesting something much more violent than a simple touch. For example, Satan's claim to "touch" all of Job's things (Jb 1:11; 2:5) is more than a simple physical touch. Thus, one of the calamities that befell Job's house was that the wind "struck" (*nāga' be*) the four corners of his house and destroyed it, making it one with the ground (Jb 1:19). Also, in Jo 9:19 and 1 Kgs 6:9 *nāga' be* means "to assault, to harm". The word *nāga' be* is also used about the idea of a mortal being touched by a supernatural

being (Is 6:7 – "he touched my mouth"; Jer 1:9 - "Yahweh touched my mouth"). Thus, according to Hamilton it is difficult, if not impossible, to decide whether in Acts 32:26 *nāga' be* would be translated as "struck" or "touched" (Hamilton 1995, 331).

[17] The Hebrew word for battle is a play on the name of the river, which will forever serve as a reminder. The Hebrew word for "battle" is found only here and in verse 25 and nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. The word itself comes from the root "abaq," which means "dust." The basic meaning of this word, used in the context of battle, refers to the idea of "being dusted during battle." In total, there are three similar words in Hebrew: Jacob, Jabbok, and "fought" (*yaaveik*) (Fruchtenbaum 2008, 482; Ibn Ezra 1988, 317). Since the word אָבָק (*abaq*) – dust – is part of the same word family, probably the action verb also contains the meaning of "to dust oneself", taking a dump. (Ross 1985, 344).

[18] Acadiana has two separate stems, a Dt (a doubled second radical with a – t – infix) and a form with a – tan – infix. Dt resembles Hitpael in that it includes a t-prefix with a doubled second radical and usually has a passive and rarely a reflexive (Huehnergard 2005, 424).

[19] "Clearly, all he cared about was Esau's reaction, which is why he develops an entire strategy of self-defense and resorts to prayer. Now, in this prayer, Jacob calls himself et-ab-dekh, the servant of YHWH (from ebed – servant, servant). ...God, however, apparently did not want Jacob to be a servant. That is why he triggers the extraordinary episode called Jacob's Struggle with the Angel." (Comănescu 2009, 33).

[20] God limited His power so that He would not prevail against Jacob, and only in this way could Jacob stand. Then came the action: He touched the hip socket. The word "touched" means that He struck the hip. It was not a mere touch but a real blow; it was a supernatural touch like that of Is 6:7, and its result was the dislocation of the hip (Fruchtenbaum 2008, 483).

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The Presence of Patriarchs in the Canon of Saint Andrew of Crete: A Hymnographic Analysis

Abstract

This study examines the presence and theological significance of the Old Testament patriarchs in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete from the perspective of Byzantine hymnography. Employing a theological–literary and philological methodology, the research explores how the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are integrated into a theological discourse of profound moral and symbolic depth, becoming paradigms of repentance, faith, and obedience to God. Through scriptural analysis and comparative study of the original Greek text and its Romanian translation, the paper highlights the poetic and theological expression of the Canon, emphasizing the pedagogical and soteriological value of these biblical figures. From a hymnographic standpoint, the study analyzes the structure of the *troparia*, the relationship between versification and theological meaning, and the way in which Saint Andrew of Crete achieves a synthesis between the history of salvation and the personal call to *metanoia*.

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St Andrew of Crete; the Great Canon; patriarchs; hymnographic exegesis; liturgical literature

Introduction

Byzantine hymnography unites theology and poetic expression, transforming Church doctrine into spiritual experience and catechetical teaching. In this sense, the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete represents one of the most profound theological and literary syntheses of Byzantine hymnography. Through his symbolic language, the

author transposes the history of salvation into an inner journey of repentance, where biblical exemplars become moral and mystical landmarks for the believer on the path of purification, illumination, and deification.

This study analyzes the presence of the Old Testament patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete from hymnographic, theological, and philological perspectives. It seeks to highlight the spiritual role of these patriarchal figures within the Canon and to show how they become icons of repentance, faith, and spiritual ascent.

The main objectives are: To identify and classify the *troparia* referring to the patriarchs, emphasizing the liturgical and thematic context of each passage; to provide a theological interpretation of these *troparia* in relation to the corresponding biblical passages and patristic commentaries; to underscore the poetic and hermeneutical dimension of Byzantine hymnography by examining the rhetorical, allegorical, and anagogical techniques employed by Saint Andrew of Crete; to determine the pedagogical and ascetical function of these scriptural images in shaping the penitential consciousness of the Orthodox believer.

The analysis is based on a comparative reading of the hymnographic text (in both the original Greek and the English translation) alongside its biblical contexts, guided by classical patristic hermeneutics. Methods of textual and thematic analysis are employed, complemented by philological observations on key Greek terminology. The theological dimension is enriched by a hymnographic interpretation that situates the *troparia* within the liturgical framework of the *Triodion* and the spirituality of Great Lent.

Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study demonstrates that the patriarchs in the *Great Canon* are not merely evocative figures, but true spiritual archetypes through which the author achieves a poetic transposition of humanity's ascent toward God.

Byzantine hymnography may thus be understood as a form of poetic theology, in which the mystical dimension is intertwined with aesthetic expression, transforming dogma into lived spiritual experience and catechesis. Through its symbolic and metaphorical language, the hymn becomes a bridge between divine revelation and human experience, granting the heart access to the mysteries of faith.

In this context, the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete stands as one of the deepest theological and poetic syntheses within the Orthodox tradition. A creation of extraordinary penitential power, it portrays the drama of fallen humanity and the call

to restore communion with God, proposing as models the great righteous figures of both the Old and New Testaments. Through its extensive structure and rich network of *troparia*, it becomes a true catechesis of repentance, guiding the believer's conscience toward *metanoia* and *theosis*.

Within the Lenten context, the Canon's purpose is to cultivate a communal penitential conscience through a biblical and poetic pedagogy that unites the theological and moral dimensions. Saint Andrew employs anagogical, allegorical, and moral hermeneutics, transforming historical events into icons of the soul's inner pilgrimage. The dominant motif of the Canon the "piercing of the heart" (*katanyxis*)—expresses this inner conversion, in which knowledge becomes prayer and biblical memory turns into personal experience.

From this perspective, the presence of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Canon has a revelatory significance. They embody successive stages of faith and spiritual perfection: Abraham's departure from sin, Isaac's voluntary sacrifice, and Jacob's ascent to the vision of God. By invoking these figures, Saint Andrew of Crete bridges salvation history with the ascetic experience of the believer, offering a living theology of conversion and hope.

Comprising 11 *irmos* and approximately 250 *troparia*, the *Great Canon* stands as a liturgical synthesis of repentance, sung in sections during the first four days of Great Lent and in its entirety on the Thursday of the fifth week. The analysis of the patriarchs in this Canon thus forms part of a symbolic and theological reading of Byzantine hymnography—one that transforms the narratives of the Old Testament into ascetical paradigms of repentance.

In the following sections, we will explore these hymnographic portraits, beginning with the figure of Abraham, the first patriarch evoked, as the symbol of the beginning of spiritual life and of faith that "leaves the Haran of sin" for the land of incorruption.

Patriarch Abraham in the Great Canon

Departure from Haran – renunciation of sin

The first reference to Abraham appears in the Canon as a call to the soul to leave the "land of Haran", that is, the zone of comfort and sin, and to go to the promised land.

15. "From the land of Haran—that is, from sin—come out, my soul, and come to the land that ever flows with living incorruption, which Abraham inherited." (*Ode III, troparion 85*)

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" (Gn 12:1, ESV)

Ἐκ γῆς Χαρρὰν ἔξελθε, τῆς ἁμαρτίας, ψυχή μου, δεῦρο εἰς γῆν ῥέουσαν ἀείζωον, ἀφθαρσίαν, ἣν ὁ Ἀβραὰμ ἐκληρώσατο. (Ὠιδὴ Γ΄, τροπάριον πε΄)

«Εἶπεν δὲ Κύριος τῷ Ἀβραμ· ἔξελθε ἐκ τῆς γῆς σου καὶ ἐκ τῆς συγγενείας σου καὶ ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ πατρός σου εἰς γῆν ἣν δείξω σοι.» (Γένεσις 12:1, LXX)

The biblical references (LXX 2006; Bible 2001) and hymnographic sources (Triodion 2010; *PG* 97, 1330D–1386C) placed in parallel indicate the scriptural and liturgical foundations upon which the hymnographer built the composition of this canon.

The *troparia* dedicated to Patriarch Abraham in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete constitute a paradigmatic example of the theological transfiguration of the biblical narrative through poetic means. The scriptural references to this episode are found in Genesis 11:31–32; 12:1–5 (the departure from Haran at the divine call); Gn 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:18–21 (the promise of the land); Heb 11:8–9, 13 (Abraham's departure without knowing his destination, his life as a "stranger"); and Acts 7:2–4 (the apostolic retelling of his call). This *troparion* becomes a concise synthesis of the entire theology of repentance: departure, calling, journey, and inheritance are transformed into stages of humanity's spiritual exodus—from the bondage of sin to the kingdom of grace.

The imperative *Ἔξελθε* (*"Come out"*), taken from Gn 12:1, retains the force of the divine summons and functions as an inaugural soteriological moment, opening the horizon of conversion. "Going forth" thus becomes the first movement of the soul detaching itself from the fallen world. The phrase *ἐκ γῆς Χαρράν* ("from the land of Haran"), immediately explained by the gloss *τῆς ἁμαρτίας* ("that is, from sin"), marks the semantic passage from geography to spirituality: Haran, once a historical location, becomes a symbol of attachment to the world, of bondage to the passions, and of inertia in the old life (St. Maximus the Confessor 2005, 222). Here the hymnographer employs an allegorical hermeneutic rooted in the Alexandrian tradition: the concrete place is transformed into a theological category, and history itself becomes a spiritual parable.

The address *Ψυχή μου* ("my soul") gives the entire *Canon* its introspective and pedagogical tone, turning it into a dialogue of conscience. It is the inner voice of repentance that admonishes and calls, an instance of penitential self-catechesis characteristic of Byzantine hymnography. The invitation *Δεῦρο εἰς γῆν* ("come to the land") introduces a vivid existential note: the word *δεῦρο* ("come here, now") does not refer to a distant destination but to an immediate, present summons. Conversion must occur in the very moment of prayer. Those who heed the divine call learn, like Abraham, "to prefer the unseen to the seen, the future to what lies before their eyes" (St. John Chrysostom 2003, 420).

The phrase *ῥέουσαν ἀείζωον ἀφθαρσίαν* ("flowing with ever-living incorruptibility") poetically encapsulates the entire theology of eternal life. The adjective *ἀείζωος* ("ever-living") evokes the continuous flow of divine grace, while *ἀφθαρσία* ("incorruptibility") signifies the eschatological state of deification. The Romanian rendering "living incorruptibility" succeeds in preserving this unity between life and immortality, anticipating the eternal condition of the saved. Finally, the verb *ἐκληρώσατο* ("he inherited," from *κληρόω*, "to receive by inheritance") transcends its material sense to denote the inheritance of grace—the participation in the heavenly blessings.

The biblical correlation with Genesis 12:1 is evident, yet Saint Andrew introduces a decisive semantic shift: the "unknown land" of Abraham's calling becomes the "land of incorruption." The geographical movement is transformed into a spiritual one, and the external pilgrimage becomes an interior journey. Through this transposition, the *troparion* proposes a mystical reinterpretation of Scripture in which each believer is invited to retrace Abraham's journey as an archetype of personal conversion.

In the light of Hebrews 11:8, which emphasizes the patriarch's faith and obedience, the *troparia* of the *Great Canon* elevate Abraham's example to that of a model of *metanoia*: leaving behind the comfort of sin and entering the realm of grace-filled freedom. From a theological perspective, the structure of the *troparion* articulates three interrelated themes: repentance as exodus, the separation from the old life; obedient faith, the full and trusting response to God's call; the promised land—a symbol of life in Christ, of Eucharistic and eschatological fulfillment.

Liturgically, the text finds its natural place within the economy of the *Triodion*: it is sung during Great Lent, the season in which every Christian is invited, like Abraham, to "come forth" from themselves and walk the path of repentance.

A stranger and traveler on earth

A second troparion about Abraham, in the same hymn, deepens the theme of alienation from the fallen world:

"You have heard of Abraham, my soul, who once left the land of his fathers and became a stranger; do you also follow his choice." (*Ode III, troparion 86*)	Τὸν Ἀβραὰμ ἤκουσας, πάλαι, ψυχή μου, καταλιπόντα γῆν πατρώαν, καὶ γενόμενον μετανάστην· τούτου τὴν προαίρεσιν μίμησαι. (Ὠιδὴ Γ΄, τροπάριον πς΄)

The text takes up the idea of leaving the "land of one's fathers" (Gn 12:1-4) and emphasizes Abraham's status as a stranger in the land of Canaan (cf. Gn 23:4, where Abraham calls himself a "stranger and sojourner"; Heb 11:9–10, 13–16 life as a stranger, waiting for the city to come).

"I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight." (Gn 23:4, ESV)	πάροικος καὶ παρεπίδημος εἰμι ἐγὼ παρ᾽ ὑμῖν· δότε οὖν μοι κτῆσιν τάφου παρ᾽ ὑμῖν, καὶ θάψω τὸν νεκρόν μου ἐκ τοῦ ὀφθαλμοῦ μου. (Γένεσις 23:4, LXX)

The *troparion* dedicated to Abraham — "You have heard of Abraham..." — continues the pedagogical logic of the *Great Canon*, articulating a second stage of conversion: from the departure from sin to the attainment of spiritual estrangement. The Greek text (*Τὸν Ἀβραὰμ...*) combines narrative clarity with symbolic density, reconfiguring the patriarch's figure into an ascetic archetype.

The connection between the hymn and its biblical source lies in the way the *troparion* encapsulates Abraham's condition of "strangeness" (Gn 23:4: *"a stranger and a sojourner"*), which the New Testament reinterprets as the believer's attitude of "awaiting the city which is to come" (Heb. 11). Strangeness thus becomes the paradigm of detachment from the world through fasting and repentance.

The Canon transposes this physical status into a spiritual principle: the Christian, like the patriarch, must live in the world yet not be of the world, seeing himself always as a traveler toward the city to come (Simeon, 49).

Lexical analysis reveals the intensity of hymnographic discourse. The verb *ἤκουσας* (*"you heard"*), derived from *ἀκούω*, carries both epistemological and moral significance: it denotes not mere auditory perception but the acceptance of responsibility that comes with knowledge. The hymnographer opens the *troparion* with a discreet reproach, the soul has heard Abraham's example but has failed to follow it, thereby drawing a distinction between *hearing the faith* and *doing the faith*, a key theme throughout the *Great Canon*.

The phrase *καταλιπόντα γῆν πατρώαν* (*"who left the land of his fathers"*) echoes almost verbatim the divine command of Genesis 12:1 (*"Go forth from your land..."*). The verb *καταλείπω* ("to leave behind completely") suggests an ontological rupture rather than a mere geographical relocation: Abraham separates himself from his past, from inherited customs and the securities of the old world. In allegorical interpretation, *γῆ πατρώα* ("the land of his fathers") becomes the image of inherited sin and of attachment to human traditions that restrict spiritual freedom.

The term *μετανάστης* ("stranger," "sojourner") imparts to the *troparion* a deeply ascetic character. In Greek, its meaning extends beyond that of a mere foreigner: *μετανάστης* denotes one who has changed his dwelling and lives in a continual state of pilgrimage. In the monastic tradition, this condition is known as *ξενιτεία*, the virtue of voluntary estrangement from the world, a mark of spiritual maturity. To become a "stranger" means no longer to identify with the transient order of the world, but to live as a pilgrim of the heavenly homeland. Abraham himself exemplifies this total detachment from material things: "Abraham was also a stranger and did not possess even a single span of land; and when he needed a place for burial, he purchased it with money." (St. Basil the Great 1986, 206)

Through the expression *τοῦτου τὴν προαίρεσιν μίμησαι* (*"follow his choice"*), Saint Andrew introduces the ethical concept of *προαίρεσις*, a fundamental term in the theology of Maximus the Confessor, signifying free will directed toward the good (*St. Maximus the Confessor 1983, 75*). The soul is urged not only to imitate Abraham's action but also the moral intention behind it: the freedom to choose obedience. Thus, the *troparion* shifts the focus from the historical event to the inner act of decision, defining repentance as a movement of the will toward God.

The biblical correspondence is twofold. In Genesis 23:4, Abraham says to the sons of Heth, *"I am a stranger and a sojourner among you"* (*πάροικος καὶ παρεπίδημος εἰμι ἐγώ παρ' ὑμῖν*), acknowledging his earthly pilgrimage. The Epistle to the Hebrews

(11:13–16) develops this self-understanding into an entire *ethos* of faith: *"They confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth... desiring a better, that is, a heavenly country."* The Canon translates this theology of holy alienation into an ascetic pedagogy: once the soul has left Haran—that is, sin—it must learn to live detached from the world, oriented toward the "city to come."

The hymnographer thus constructs a grammar of separation and inner motion. Repentance emerges as a twofold movement, *ἀπόβασις* (departure) and *μετανάστασις* (estrangement) which defines not only the beginning of conversion but its ongoing dynamic.

Abraham, therefore, becomes the paradigm of the spiritual man: one who dwells in the world yet does not belong to it, who hears God's call and transforms his life into an unceasing pilgrimage toward the heavenly homeland. The sixteenth *troparion* of the third Ode is not merely a moral evocation but a true catechesis on the calling to holy estrangement, inner freedom, and the faithful perseverance of a heart that never ceases to journey forward.

The Hospitality at the Oak of Mamre – Faith Rewarded

The third *troparion* dedicated to Abraham evokes the scene of the Lord's appearance at the Oak of Mamre (Gn 18:1–15):

"You have heard of Abraham, my soul, who once left the land of his fathers and became a stranger; do you also follow his choice." (*Ode III, troparion 86*)	Ἐν τῇ δρυῒ τῇ Μαμβρῆ, φιλοξενήσας ὁ Πατριάρχης τοὺς Ἀγγέλους, ἐκληρώσατο μετὰ γῆρας τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τὸ θή. (Ὠιδὴ Γ΄, τροπάριον πζ΄)

The text alludes to the episode at the Oak of Mamre — *Gn* 18:1–15 (the hospitality at the oaks of Mamre and the announcement of Isaac's birth); *Gn* 21:1–7 (the birth of Isaac "in old age"); *Rom* 4:18–21 and *Heb* 11:11–12 (the confirmation of the promise and the birth through faith).

"And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre… three men were standing in front of him. The Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." (Gn 18:1–2, 10, ESV)	«Ὤφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ὁ Θεὸς πρὸς τῇ δρυῒ τῇ Μαμβρῇ…καὶ ἰδοὺ τρεῖς ἄνδρες εἱστήκεισαν ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ·» «λέγει· ἐπιστρέφων ἐπιστρέψω πρὸς σὲ κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τοῦτον εἰς ὥρας, καὶ Σάρρα ἡ γυνή σου ἕξει υἱόν.» (Γένεσις *18:1–2, 10,* LXX)

The *troparion* "At the oak of Mamre..." represents the culmination of the Abrahamic theme in the *Great Canon*. While the preceding *troparia* describe the soul's movement from sin toward holy estrangement, this hymn shifts the focus to *active faith*, a faith expressed through love and rewarded by grace. The scene at Mamre, drawn from *Genesis* 18, becomes a theological icon of synergy: man offers hospitality, and God responds by fulfilling His promise.

The phrase *ἐν τῇ δρυῒ τῇ Μαμβρῇ* (*"at the oak of Mamre"*) reproduces with precision the Old Testament toponym (*ἐπὶ τῇ δρυῒ τῇ Μαμβῇ*), preserving the solemn resonance of the theophanic setting. In biblical symbolism, *δρῦς* ("oak") represents stability and encounter, while *Μαμβρῇ* designates the space of divine epiphany. In hymnographic interpretation, this place of encounter becomes a metaphor for the human heart: the soul purified from passions becomes the "oak" under whose shade God manifests Himself.

The participle *φιλοξενήσας* ("having shown hospitality"), derived from *φιλοξενέω* ("to welcome strangers with love"), reveals a fundamental theological virtue. *Φιλοξενία* ("hospitality") is not merely an act of human kindness, but a mode of *theandric communion*. In welcoming the three guests, Abraham welcomes God Himself in a prefiguration of the Trinitarian revelation (St. John Chrysostom 2003b, 109). Saint Paul reinterprets this gesture as paradigmatic for faith: *"By showing hospitality to strangers, some have entertained angels unawares"* (*Heb 13:2*).

Furthermore, the verb *ἐκληρώσατο* ("received by inheritance"), derived from *κληρόω*, expresses the gratuitous nature of divine grace rather than any human merit. Abraham's faith is rewarded *"in old age"* (*μετὰ γῆρας*), at a time when nature can no longer bring forth fruit. This biological impossibility underscores the miraculous character of divine fulfillment: what human power cannot accomplish, grace brings to completion.

The phrase *τῆς ἐπαγγελίας τὸ θήραμα* ("the game [or prey] of the promise") is among the most poetic expressions in the entire *Canon*. The noun *ἐπαγγελία* refers to the divine promise, while *θήραμα* ("game," "prey") introduces an ascetic metaphor: the fruit of grace is "hunted" through faith and perseverance. Thus, the *"game of the promise"* becomes a symbol of the inner fruit of the soul, the spiritual Isaac, born through obedience and grace.

This *troparion* condenses, in a verse of remarkable density, the entire theology of *Genesis* 18: the act of hospitality followed by divine blessing. The hymnographer omits narrative details, preserving instead the theological essence, faith expressed through love invites the presence of God and brings forth the fruit of the promise.

Saint Andrew of Crete thereby articulates a theology of reciprocity: welcoming love becomes the doorway to grace. The encounter at Mamre is transfigured into a hymnographic parable of synergy, God reveals Himself where man responds with hospitality, that is, with the loving openness of the heart (Simeon, 49).

Hence, the *Great Canon* presents the episode at Mamre as a symbol of the meeting between humanity and God. Abraham, the patriarch of faith, becomes the image of the receptive soul who, opening the tent of his heart, partakes in the divine blessing.

Patriarch Isaac – The Voluntary Sacrifice and Christological Prefiguration

The Sacrifice of Isaac – Obedience and Foreshadowing of the Cross

The *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete refers briefly but profoundly to the figure of Isaac, closely connected to the episode of his sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

"Understanding Isaac, O wretched soul, as one who was mystically offered as a new sacrifice, a whole burnt offering to the Lord, follow also his will." (Ode III, troparion 88)	Τὸν Ἰσαὰκ, τάλαινα, γνοῦσα, ψυχή μου, καινὴν θυσίαν, μυστικῶς ὁλοκαρπούμενον τῷ Κυρίῳ, μίμησαι αὐτοῦ τὴν προαίρεσιν. (Ὠιδὴ Γ΄, τροπάριον πη΄)

The biblical text alludes to the episode that took place on Mount Moriah

He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Gn 22:2, ESV)	«Λάβε τὸν υἱόν σου τὸν ἀγαπητόν, ὃν ἠγάπησας, τὸν Ἰσαάκ… καὶ ἀνάγαγε αὐτὸν… εἰς ὁλοκάρπωσιν.» (Γένεσις 22:2, LXX)

The *troparion* dedicated to Isaac in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete ("Understanding Isaac") is one of the most lucid expressions of Byzantine typological theology. Through a dense, theologically charged poetic structure, the hymnographer transforms the biblical episode of Isaac's sacrifice (*Gn* 22:1–13) into an icon of the Cross and of humanity's complete submission to God (Simeon, 49).

Lexical analysis reveals the symbolic richness of the text. The placement of the name *Τὸν Ἰσαάκ*/on Isaac at the beginning has an invocative function, signaling the centrality of this figure within the economy of salvation. In Saint Andrew's reading, Isaac becomes a prophetic image of Christ, while the episode of his sacrifice prefigures the offering on Golgotha. The phrase *Τάλαινα, ψυχή μου*/O wretched soul introduces the penitential tone characteristic of the *Great Canon*: the hymnographer confronts the sinful soul with the example of obedient purity, calling it imitation and to spiritual shame.

The participle *Γνοῦσα*/understanding, derived from *γιγνώσκω* ("to know"), denotes experiential knowledge rather than mere intellectual awareness. The soul is invited to "understand mystically" (*μυστικῶς*) the meaning of sacrifice, transcending the literal sense of the narrative. In the expression *Καινὴν θυσίαν*/a new sacrifice, the adjective *καινός* ("new") carries both Eucharistic and Christological resonance: Isaac's sacrifice becomes the figure of the "new sacrifice" offered by Christ, through which the Old Law is fulfilled in the Law of Grace (St. Gregory of Nazianzus 2004, 55).

Through the formula *Μυστικῶς ὁλοκαρπούμενον τῷ Κυρίῳ*/mystically sacrificed burnt offering to the Lord, the hymnographer reinterprets the biblical term *ὁλοκάρπωσις* ("burnt offering") in a spiritual sense. The participle *ὁλοκαρπούμενον* emphasizes the total gift of being: Isaac is not merely the external victim but the embodiment of perfect obedience and total self-offering. The adverb *μυστικῶς* adds the typological dimension—the historical event becomes a symbol of the Cross, while *τῷ Κυρίῳ* underscores the theocentric orientation of the entire act: everything is offered *to the Lord*.

The imperative *Μίμησαι αὐτοῦ τὴν προαίρεσιν*/Follow his will concludes the *troparion* with an ethical exhortation. The term *προαίρεσις*, essential to patristic ethics, denotes *free will*—that is, the faculty of choice (*τὸ αὐτεξούσιον*) directed toward the good rather than mere passive intention (St. Maximus the Confessor 1983, 75). Saint Andrew urges the soul to imitate not only Isaac's outward deed but his inner disposition: the freedom to choose obedience. Thus, the *troparion* shifts the focus from external sacrifice to the interior act of decision, defining repentance as the movement of the will toward God.

By correlating these meanings, Saint Andrew of Crete constructs a poetic theology of inner sacrifice. Isaac becomes both the type of Christ and the icon of the repentant soul that "offers itself as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (*Rom* 12:1). This *troparion* thus harmonizes perfectly with the ascetic theology of the *Great Canon*, where sacrifice is transformed into a metaphor for *metanoia*. Saint Andrew shifts the emphasis from the physical shedding of blood to the burning of one's own will, recognizing therein the true "new sacrifice." In this light, Isaac appears not only as an Old Testament figure but as the model of the soul that, through obedience and love, offers itself wholly to God.

Patriarch Jacob in the Great Canon

Saint Andrew dedicates to Jacob whom he often calls *"the greatest among the patriarchs"* a series of *troparia* distributed between the third and fourth odes of the *Great Canon*. The life of this patriarch is interpreted allegorically, step by step, as a veritable ascetic itinerary of the soul's correction. In what follows, we will analyze the principal themes: the vision of the heavenly ladder, the struggle to obtain the two wives, the allegory of Leah and Rachel, the wrestling and the vision of God, and finally the birth of the twelve patriarchs.

Jacob's Ladder – The Ascent of Virtues and the Elevation of the Mind

In the *Great Canon*, Jacob's dream at Bethel (*Gn* 28:10–17) is mentioned twice. First, in a *troparion* of the third ode, the hymnographer reproaches the soul with these words:

"You know the ladder of Jacob, my soul, which was shown reaching from earth up to heaven; why have you not established a firm step—the right faith?" (*Ode III, troparion 91*)	Τὴν Ἰακὼβ κλίμακα ἔγνως, ψυχή μου, δεικνυομένηνἀπὸ γῆς πρὸς τὰ οὐράνια· τί μὴ ἔσχες, βάσιν ἀσφαλή, τὴν εὐσέβειαν. (Ὠιδὴ Γ΄, τροπάριον ϛα΄)
"The ladder that the great among the patriarchs once saw, O my soul, is the revelation of active ascent and of the elevation of the mind; therefore, if you wish to live in action, in knowledge, and in the uplifting of thought, renew yourself." (*Ode IV, troparion 103*)	Τὸν Ἰσαὰκ, τάλαινα, γνοῦσα, ψυχή μου, καινὴν θυσίαν, μυστικῶς ὁλοκαρπούμενον τῷ Κυρίῳ, μίμησαι αὐτοῦ τὴν προαίρεσιν. (Ὠιδὴ Γ΄, τροπάριον πη΄)

The biblical text alludes to the ladder that Jacob saw.

"And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Gn 28:12, 17, ESV)	«Καὶ ἐνυπνιάσθη· καὶ ἰδοὺ κλίμαξ ἑστηριγμένη ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ἧς ἡ κεφαλὴ ἥπτετο τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ ἄγγελοι τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀνέβαινον καὶ κατέβαινον ἐπ' αὐτῆς.» «καὶ ἔφη· φοβερὸς ὁ τόπος οὗτος· οὐκ ἔστιν τοῦτο ἀλλ' ἢ οἶκος Θεοῦ, καὶ αὕτη ἡ πύλη τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.» (Γένεσις 28:12,17, LXX)

The symbol of Jacob's ladder stands among the most profound and complex images of spiritual ascent in the *Great Canon*. In the *troparion "The ladder that Jacob saw,"* the hymnographer condenses the entire theology of human synergy with divine grace and of continual *metanoia*.

The central term *κλίμαξ* (*ladder*) refers to the episode in *Genesis* 28:12–17, where Jacob beholds in a dream a ladder set between earth and heaven, upon which the angels of God ascend and descend. In the hymnographic text, this image becomes an ascetic metaphor for the union of the two realms: man ascends through the virtues, while grace

descends through the angels, revealing the synergy between human freedom and divine operation (Simeon 2012, 56). This symbol would later inspire Saint John Climacus' *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, where *κλίμαξ* becomes a technical term for spiritual progress (St. John Climacus 2013). Thus, the *troparia* of the *Great Canon* are integrated into a broader ascetic tradition: the image of the ladder becomes a synthesis of the synergy between virtuous praxis and contemplative theoria. The Canon poetically expresses this theology, urging the soul to ascend toward heaven like the patriarch Jacob.

The participial phrase *δεικνυομένην ἀπὸ γῆς πρὸς τὰ οὐράνια* ("which appeared from the earth toward the heavens") conveys the dynamic of ascent inherent in the ladder—its dual movement of rising and descending represents the path of virtue and contemplation. The hymnographer systematically unfolds this dynamic in four stages: *Βάσις ἀσφαλής* (*firm step*) – the dogmatic foundation, the stability of true faith; *Πρακτικὴ ἐπίβασις* (*ascent through deeds*) – moral praxis, the purification from passions; *Γνωστικὴ ἀνάβασις* (*ascent through knowledge*) – the enlightenment of the mind; *Θεωρία* (*contemplation*), the vision and union with God.

The phrase *πράξει καὶ γνώσει καὶ θεωρίᾳ βιῶν* ("to live through action, knowledge, and contemplation") encapsulates, in a Trinitarian rhythm, the entire patristic anthropology of spiritual ascent. This triadic structure *praxis, gnosis, Theoria*, forms the foundation of Eastern Christian spiritual theology, from Evagrius Ponticus (Evagrius Ponticus 1947, 37) to Maximus the Confessor (St. Maximus the Confessor 1983b, 259), for whom the spiritual life is an ordered ascent: from action to knowledge, and from knowledge to the vision of God.

The imperative *ἀνακαινίσθητι* (*be renewed*) concludes the *troparion* with an appeal to the continual renewal of the mind. The noun *ἀνακαίνισις* denotes regeneration through repentance, an ongoing renewal that perpetually restarts the soul's journey toward God. Within the logic of the *Great Canon*, renewal is not a single act but a dynamic state, a constant re-beginning of the spiritual ascent.

Jacob thus emerges as the model of spiritual synthesis: if Abraham represents the beginning of faith and Isaac the virtue of obedient sacrifice, Jacob embodies perfection, the fulfillment of humanity's ascent to God. In Saint Andrew's interpretation, **J**acob's ladder becomes the icon of the Church itself: the space where heaven and earth meet, where grace and human striving converge, and where the soul rises step by step toward divine vision. "Be renewed, my soul" thus becomes not merely a poetic exhortation but

the spiritual formula of an unceasing *metanoia*, transforming the entirety of human existence into a ladder ascending to God.

Jacob's Toils – Patience in Attaining the Promise

Another *troparion* (Ode IV, 102) recalls the hardships that Jacob endured in the service of his uncle Laban, laboring to obtain as wives his two daughters:

"The patriarch endured the heat of the day for lack, and suffered the frost of the night; in all his days he made gain, shepherding, toiling, and serving, that he might win his two wives." (*Ode IV, troparion 104*)	Τὸν καύσωνα τῆς ἡμέρας ὑπέμεινε δι' ἔνδειαν ὁ Πατριάρχης, καὶ τὸν παγετὸν τῆς νυκτὸς ἤνεγκε, καθ' ἡμέραν κλέμματα ποιούμενος, ποιμαίνων, πυκτεύων, δουλεύων, ἵνα τὰς δύο γυναῖκας εἰσαγάγηται. (Ὠιδὴ Δ΄, τροπάριον ρδ΄)

The biblical text alludes to the image of the heat of the day and the cold of the night.

"There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes." (Gn 31:40, ESV)	«Ἡμέρας ἀνέτρεχέ με καύσων, καὶ παγωνιὰ νυκτός, καὶ ἀπῄχετο ὁ ὕπνος ἀπὸ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν μου.» (Γένεσις 31:40, LXX)

This description is inspired by Jacob's confession to Laban: "By day the heat consumed me" (Gn 31:40), together with the account that Jacob served seven years for Leah and another seven for Rachel (*Gn* 29:20–28). The hymnographer unites these elements, presenting Jacob as the "patriarch" who steadfastly endured the burning heat and the chill of night, faithfully laboring as a shepherd and, at the same time, "gaining" under Laban's harshness (Simeon 2012, 56). The expressions *καύσων* ("heat") and *παγετός* ("cold") evoke the extremes of physical suffering, transformed in the *troparion* into symbols of the inner trials and spiritual hardships of the soul.

The *anagogical* interpretation of this *troparion* lies in the parallel between Jacob's two wives and the two peoples united in Christ. Just as Jacob became the husband of two ssters, so too the Lord is revealed as the Bridegroom of two people. Leah, weak

in her eyes, prefigures the ancient people of Israel, who, though blessed, "closed their eyes" and did not wish to see God. Leah bore six sons, symbolizing the fullness of the Law. Rachel, beautiful and pleasing to the sight yet barren, represents the Gentiles, loved for their purity of heart but unfruitful until the coming of grace. Through divine blessing, Rachel bore two sons and died in childbirth, a sign of the birth of faith among the nations through suffering and renewal. The Lord united these two peoples, transforming them into one Church. The once-barren people became fruitful through spiritual regeneration, giving birth to many children by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, through Rachel's two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, are prefigured the Old and the New Testaments (Acachie 2021, 174).

The spiritual meaning of the *troparion* is evident: patience and daily labor are indispensable for attaining what is truly precious. The verb *ὑπέμεινε* ("he endured") in the Greek text defines Jacob's essential attitude an active, not passive, endurance, implying continuous *ἐνέργεια πνευματική*, or "spiritual energy." This *ὑπομονή* (patience, steadfast perseverance) becomes the icon of the ascetic's disposition: faithfulness to promise through persistent effort.

The sequence of participles, *ποιμαίνων* ("shepherding"), *πυκτεύων* ("struggling like an athlete"), and *δουλεύων* ("serving") forms a crescendo of spiritual exertion. *Ποιμαίνων* suggests the careful tending of one's inner flock, the guarding of thoughts and virtues; *πυκτεύων*, from *πυκτεύω* ("to box"), evokes the unseen combat against passions; *δουλεύων* expresses humble obedience, the service of one who labors for divine blessing.

Just as Jacob did not shrink from fourteen years of toil to win his beloved wives, so too the Christian must persevere through long and arduous labor in the spiritual life to obtain the virtues and blessings promised by God. In the context of Great Lent, this *troparion* becomes a hymn to ascetic endurance: fasting, vigils, and ceaseless prayer, harsh as the day's heat and cold as the night, must be borne with hope in spiritual reward. The *Canon* thus teaches that nothing of eternal value is achieved without toil. Furthermore, Jacob's designation here as the "patriarch who labored for both women" anticipates the next allegorical reading of Leah and Rachel, completing the cycle of his typological and moral significance.

Leah and Rachel – The Allegory of the Active and Contemplative Life

The *troparia* of the *Great Canon* moves here from historical narrative to explicit symbolic interpretation. The following *troparion* (Ode IV, 105) directly explains the allegory:

"Through the two women, understand action and knowledge within the higher vision: through Leah, action, for she was the mother of many children; and through Rachel, contemplation, for she toiled greatly. For without toil, neither action nor contemplation, O my soul, can be perfected." *(Ode IV, troparion 105)*	Γυναίκας μοι δύο νόει, τὴν πράξιν τε καὶ τὴν γνῶσιν ἐν θεωρίᾳ· τὴν μὲν Λείαν, πράξιν ὡς πολύτεκνον· τὴν Ῥαχήλ δὲ, γνώσιν ὡς πολύπονον· καὶ γὰρ ἄνευ πόνων, οὐ πράξις, οὐ θεωρία, ψυχή κατορθωθήσεται. (Ὠιδὴ Δ΄, τροπάριον ρε΄)

The biblical text alludes to the two dimensions of spiritual life — the active life (praxis) and the contemplative life (theoria).

"When the Lord saw that Leah was hated..." (Gn 29:31, ESV) "When Rachel saw…'Give me children…" (Gn 30:1, ESV)	«Ἰδὼν δὲ Κύριος ὅτι μισουμένη ἡ Λεία, ἤνοιξε τὴν μήτραν αὐτῆς…» «Ῥαχὴλ δὲ εἶπεν… δός μοι τέκνα…» (Γένεσις 29:31–35; 30:1–2, LXX)

In Saint Andrew of Crete's interpretation, the biblical episode of Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel (*Gn* 29) transcends its historical dimension, becoming an archetype of spiritual life. The hymnographer transforms the patriarch's two wives into symbols of the two complementary paths of salvation: *praxis* (the active life, the life of deeds) and *theoria* (the contemplative life, the life of knowledge). This typological reading, rooted in the Origenist tradition and developed by the Cappadocian Fathers and Saint Maximus the Confessor (St. Maximus the Confessor 1983, 315), becomes, in the *Great Canon*, a hymnographic treatise on ascetic anthropology.

The introductory expression *Διὰ τῶν δύο γυναικῶν* ("through the two women") establishes the allegorical framework: Leah and Rachel are no longer historical figures, but stages of the spiritual journey. *Λεία – πρᾶξις* represents the moral and active life, the

labor of the bodily virtues, while *Ῥαχήλ – θεωρία* signifies the luminous contemplation of the purified mind. The hymnographer makes this symbolism explicit through the phrase *δηλονότι πράξεως καὶ γνώσεως* ("that is, for action and for knowledge"), clarifying the correspondence between moral practice and spiritual understanding (Simeon 2012, 56).

The verbs *ἐκοπίασας* and *ἐμόχθησας* ("to toil," "to labor") express the dynamics of ascetic exertion: Jacob *"toiled wisely"* (*σοφῶς ἐκοπίασας*), that is, he worked with discernment, maintaining equilibrium between action and contemplation. In contrast, the exhortation *πλούτισον ἔργοις καὶ ἐννοίαις* ("enrich yourself in deeds and thoughts") unites the moral (*ἔργα*) and intellectual (*ἔννοιαι*) spheres, revealing that perfection lies in their harmonious integration.

The hymnographer does not set Leah and Rachel in opposition, but in synthesis: *Ἂς ἀμφοτέρας ἐκτήσατο εἰς ἐργασίαν καὶ θεωρίαν* ("he acquired both for work and for contemplation"). The verb *κτάομαι* ("to acquire," "to make one's own") indicates fruitful possession and spiritual maturity: Jacob does not renounce one for the other but unites them within a single movement of the soul. On a symbolic level, his "marriage" to the two wives becomes an icon of the soul's union with the virtues, a synergy between body and mind.

From a biblical perspective, the episode of the *two seven years of service* (*Gn* 29:20, 30) receives both numerical and spiritual interpretation. The first period, for Leah, signifies the work of deeds, moral and ascetic effort; the second, for Rachel, represents knowledge and contemplation, the fruit of prior purification. The number seven, traditionally associated with fulfillment, denotes the perfection of virtues, while its doubling suggests the completeness of the two dimensions of spiritual life.

Theologically, Saint Andrew of Crete achieves here a mystical synthesis of the Eastern Ascetic tradition. Leah represents the beginning of life in Christ, the struggle of deeds, fasting, prayer, and obedience, her "weak eyes" symbolizing a limited yet fruitful vision. Rachel, beautiful but long barren, embodies contemplation, which bears fruit only after the body has been subdued and purified through ascetic labor.

In succinct form, these *troparia* articulate the essence of Orthodox ascetic anthropology: the human person is called to labor in action, to be illumined in knowledge, and to unite with God in contemplation. Jacob thus becomes the image of the perfected soul, which through toil, discernment, and divine illumination, attains

participation in both the active and the contemplative life, anticipating eternal rest in the divine light.

"Keep Vigil… and Become Perfect, Like the Greatest of the Patriarchs"

In a subsequent *troparion* (Ode IV, 106), Saint Andrew of Crete returns to the example of Jacob himself, exhorting the soul to vigilance and perfection:

"Keep vigil, O my soul, and become distinguished—perfect—like the greatest among the patriarchs, that you may acquire action together with lofty thought, become a mind that beholds God, ascend with your intellect into the ineffable cloud, and make yourself a merchant of great things." *(Ode IV, troparion 106)*	Γρηγόρησον, ὦ ψυχή μου, ἀρίστευσον ὡς ὁ μέγας ἐν Πατριάρχαις· ἵνα κτήσῃ πράξιν μετὰ γνώσεως· ἵνα χρηματίσῃς νοῦς ὁρῶν τὸν Θεόν, καὶ φθάσῃς τὸν ἄδυτον γνόφον ἐν θεωρίᾳ, καὶ γένῃ μεγαλέμπορος. (Ὠιδὴ Δ΄, τροπάριον ρς΄))

The biblical text alludes to watchfulness (vigilance) — both physical and spiritual.

"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel..." "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." (Gn 32:28–30, ESV)	«οὐ κληθήσεται ἔτι τὸ ὄνομά σου Ἰακώβ ἀλλὰ Ἰσραήλ…» «Εἶδον Θεὸν πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον, καὶ ἐσώθη μου ἡ ψυχή.» (Γένεσις 32:28–30, LXX)

The *troparion* „Γρηγόρησον, ὦ ψυχή μου…" "Watch, O my soul…" marks the culmination of Patriarch Jacob's spiritual journey in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete and stands among the most profound expressions of Byzantine mystical theology. In this hymn, the author condenses the entire ascetic experience of the Old Testament into a call to vigilance and perfection addressed to the human soul.

The imperative "Γρηγόρησον" (*Watch*) introduces the fundamental *neptic* theme of the Eastern Christian tradition: the state of inner attention, unceasing prayer, and continual struggle against the passions. This vigilance evokes the nocturnal scene of Jacob's wrestling with the angel (*Gn* 32:24–30), that decisive moment in which man,

through persevering prayer, prevails and receives a new name, Israel, meaning *"he who has seen God."*

The hymn thus exhorts the soul to remain wakeful, recalling Jacob's long night of struggle with "the Man/Angel" (*Gn* 32:24), during which he contended until dawn and was finally blessed. In this context, vigilance becomes the symbol of spiritual wakefulness, unceasing prayer and interior warfare. Through such watchfulness, the soul is invited to become "distinguished," that is, *chosen* and *perfected*, like the patriarch. The purpose of this vigil is to acquire both *praxis* (active virtue) and *theoria* (higher contemplation)—the two "spouses" represented earlier by Leah and Rachel.

What follows is a list of spiritual gifts to which the soul must aspire, once again illustrated through the example of Jacob. The soul must become a God-seeing mind (*νοῦς ὁρῶν τὸν Θεόν*), since Jacob not only beheld the angels ascending and descending the ladder but also wrestled with God Himself at Peniel, exclaiming: *"I have seen God face to face"* (*Gn* 32:30). Jacob thus experiences, in figure, the *vision of God*; likewise, the purified soul attains illumination through the grace of divine encounter. As the commentary on the text observes, one is called to become a *"God-seeing intellect" (νοῦς θεόπτης)*, like Jacob, who saw the angels of God ascending the ladder, and at its summit, God Himself.

The next phrase *"to reach the ineffable cloud"* (*νεφέλη ἄδυτος*), introduces the apophatic dimension of mystical theology. The "unspeakable cloud" recalls the luminous darkness of the divine presence into which Moses entered on Mount Sinai (*Ex* 24:15–18), and resonates with the teaching of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, for whom God is known only in "divine darkness." Here, Saint Andrew calls the soul to the highest form of mystical theology: to penetrate the ineffable mysteries of divine light that lie beyond human comprehension.

The final exhortation, *"become a merchant of great things"* (*μεγαλέμπορος*), draws upon the Gospel parable of the merchant seeking fine pearls (*Mt* 13:45–46). It evokes the image of the ascetic as a spiritual trader who exchanges earthly labors for heavenly treasures, gathering the riches of virtue and grace through persistent effort.

Taken together, this *troparion* outlines a fivefold anagogy: vigilance (*γρηγόρησις*), deed (*πρᾶξις*), knowledge (*γνῶσις*), vision (*θεωρία*), and apophatic contemplation (*μυστικὴ θεολογία*). These stages delineate the movement from ascetic struggle to the illumination of the mind and, finally, to communion with God. Through the example of Jacob, "the greatest among the patriarchs", Saint Andrew of Crete presents the image of

the *deified human being*: one who, through vigilance and prayer, comes to see God *"face to face"* and to partake of the true wisdom of divine grace.

The Twelve Patriarchs – The Mystical Ladder of Virtues

Finally, the *Great Canon* concludes its series of references to the patriarch Jacob with a symbolically rich image that recalls the birth of his twelve sons:

"Having begotten the twelve patriarchs, the greatest among the patriarchs has made them for you, O my soul, a mystical ladder for the ascent of deeds—his sons being as foundations and steps, as wisely ordered degrees of spiritual ascent." *(Ode IV, troparion 107)*	Τοὺς δώδεκα Πατριάρχας, ὁ μέγας ἐν Πατριάρχαις παιδοποιήσας, μυστικῶς ἐστήριξέ σοι κλίμακα, πρακτικῆς ψυχὴ μου ἀναβάσεως, τοὺς παῖδας, ὡς βάθρα, τὰς βάσεις, ὡς ἀναβάσεις, πανσόφως ὑποθέμενος. (Ὠιδὴ Δ΄, τροπάριον ρζ΄)

The biblical text refers to the *enumeration of Jacob's sons*, the twelve patriarchs of Israel, who became the founders of the twelve tribes.

"Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. (Gn 35:22–26, ESV)	„οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰακώβ δώδεκα…" (Γένεσις 35:22–26, LXX)

The text of the *Great Canon* draws upon the biblical account of the birth of Jacob's twelve sons and interprets it typologically: each son, and by extension each tribe, becomes a "step" in the soul's ascent toward God. In this reading, Jacob's progeny forms a moral ladder, a symbolic image of spiritual progress and inner transformation.

The final *troparion* in the cycle dedicated to the patriarch Jacob (*"Τούς δώδεκα Πατριάρχας…"*) provides both a symbolic and theological conclusion to the Jacobic sequence within the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete. The birth of the twelve sons is no longer presented as a historical event, but as a symbol of spiritual perfection: the sons are transformed into *ἀναβάσεις* (*steps*) and *βάσεις* (*foundations*) of the spiritual life. Saint Andrew does not enumerate them individually; instead, he offers the comprehensive vision of a ladder of virtues, a mystical edifice in which the moral ascent of the soul mirrors the perfection of the chosen people (Simeon 2012, 58).

The image of the patriarch "ὁ μέγας ἐν Πατριάρχαις" (*the great among the patriarchs*) thus becomes paradigmatic. Jacob is no longer merely the father of the twelve tribes, but the archetype of the fruitful soul—one who has transformed the gift of revelation into the fruit of good works. His "sons" represent, in symbolic language, the births of virtues: faith, patience, righteousness, mercy, purity, discernment, and other moral qualities that constitute the architecture of the renewed human being.

In Saint Andrew of Crete's vision, Jacob embodies the complete synthesis of the soul's spiritual journey: he *receives the ladder* (revelation), *performs the deed* (Leah), *attains contemplation* (Rachel), *keeps vigil and beholds God* (Peniel), and finally *bears the fruits of virtue* (the twelve sons). The *troparion* of the twelve patriarchs therefore serves as the theological epilogue of the entire Jacobic cycle. Here, spiritual ascent becomes fruit, and the fruit itself becomes a new ladder, an endless anagogy leading the soul ever upward into the infinite mystery of God.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the remarkable way in which the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete employs the figures of the biblical patriarchs for pedagogical and spiritual purposes. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, central figures of the Old Testament, are presented not as mere historical characters, but as living icons of the soul's struggle with sin and its ascent toward God.

From a hymnographic standpoint, Saint Andrew masterfully weaves together the scriptural text—especially in the Greek version of the Septuagint, which he frequently quotes or paraphrases—with poetic expression and allegorical interpretation rooted in patristic tradition. Philological nuances are evident in his use of key scriptural terms and images: *"departure"* from Haran as an exodus from sin, *"becoming a stranger"* as ascetic alienation, *"burning with fire"* as total self-offering, *"ladder"* as the summit of the virtues, and *"mind seeing God"* as the illumination of the intellect. These linguistic and theological elements reveal the author's profound familiarity with both Scripture and the spiritual exegesis of the Fathers.

From a literary-theological perspective, the analyzed *troparia* outline a complete itinerary of repentance. The soul is first called to come out of sin and trust in God, like Abraham; then to be ready for self-sacrifice, like Isaac; and finally, like Jacob, to walk the long and arduous path of struggle through which it acquires both virtuous deeds (*praxis*) and divine contemplation (*theoria*). The patriarchs serve both as positive examples,

Abraham's faith, Isaac's obedience, Jacob's perseverance, and as moral counterpoints to be avoided, such as indifference and hardness of heart, personified in Esau.

On a historical and spiritual level, the *Great Canon* reflects the homiletic method of the Fathers: the *actualization* of biblical history within the personal experience of the believer. Saint Andrew takes events from sacred history and brings them into the liturgical present of the praying soul, addressing it directly in the second person. This internalization of salvation history transforms biblical narrative into a personal dialogue of conscience and repentance. The patriarchs thus become witnesses and intercessors in the court of the heart: together with prophets, apostles, and righteous men, they admonish, guide, and inspire the soul toward conversion.

The patriarchs, progenitors of the chosen people, also embody the beginnings of a new spiritual journey: Abraham represents the beginning of faith, covenant, and divine promise; Isaac, the sacrificial obedience that prefigures the New Covenant in Christ; Jacob, in whom faith becomes vision, bearing the divine name *Israel*, "he who has seen God."

Through them, the *Great Canon* proclaims that a return to God is always possible, no matter how deeply one has fallen, if one follows the path of faith, obedience, and perseverance exemplified by these scriptural models.

At the same time, the richness of imagery, from the *oak of Mamre* to the *ladder reaching to heaven*, endows the text with poetic beauty and symbolic depth that nourish not only the intellect but also the heart of the believer in prayer.

Thus, our analysis confirms that the presence of the patriarchs in the *Great Canon* of Saint Andrew of Crete is neither incidental nor ornamental, but structural and essential. They form a true bridge between the Old and New Testaments within the consciousness of the Church. Liturgically and spiritually, they become our companions and mediators in repentance, guiding the soul step by step on its ascent back to God.

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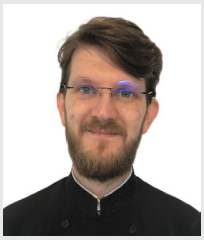
Jacob's Journey of Virtue: From Genesis 32 to Hymnography and Philokalia

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 מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים appear to Jacob is named by him מַחֲנָיִם (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 (אֲדֹנִי עֵשָׂו ; עַבְדְּךָ 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 וֵאלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק) but ultimately appeals to his own personal relationship with Yahweh (יְהוָה הָאֹמֵר אֵלַי), 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" (אֵם עַל־בָּנִים; cf. Hos 10:14), depicting the height of cruelty that might be inflicted upon his family. The expression in verse 13, הֵיטֵב 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: אֲכַפְּרָה פָנָיו 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 יִשָּׂא פָנָי 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 אָבָק ("dust"; Gesenius 1915, 7), suggesting either a dust-raising struggle or close combat. Its imperfect form (יֵאָבֵק) 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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Abraham's Son and Sons in the New Testament

Abstract

The present study refers, first of all, to the Savior Jesus Christ, Who, according to the human nature He assumed through the Incarnation, was the "son of Abraham" (*υἱοῦ Ἀβραάμ*), submitting Himself, like His ancestor of old, to the ritual of circumcision (Mt 1:1; Lk 2:21), but also to all the descendants according to the flesh of the patriarch Abraham, who are "according to the nature" (*κατὰφύσιν*) "sons of Abraham" (Jn 8:33; Rom 11:21). There is, however, another category of "sons of Abraham": those "of faith" (*ἐκπίστεως*) that is, "those who do the works of Abraham" or "those who imitate his example" (Jn 8:39), considered by God Himself "righteous" and "father of the righteous" (Rom 4:17; Gen 17:4-5).

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A typical scenario

When we began to study the Book of Genesis, the reference point for the story of the patriarch Abraham was, without a doubt, the text of Gen 12:1-3 (the classic episode of the "call of Abraham"). That was considered the "starting point" of the story of the patriarch Abram or the "initial point" of a long pilgrimage that continued in the space of the "Fertile Crescent" or the "Horn of Plenty" through Mesopotamia, made a short stop at Haran, then continued along the Jordan Valley to Shechem, arrived in Egypt, and then, after a brief stay in Egypt, returned to Shechem (at the Oak of Mamre). The text of Gen 12:1-3 was also a reference because it was seen or interpreted as a messianic prophecy, the second after that of Gen 3:15, known as the "Protoevangelium".

Contrary to what we have known for a long time, the story of Abram does not begin with the text of Gen 12:1-3, but with a brief evocation of his family's genealogy, an

evocation contained in the previous chapter of the book (Gen 11:27-32), which presents us with the genealogy of one of Noah's sons (Shem), presented first in Gen 10:21-31, and then resumed in Gen 11:10-26.

The few references these texts provide regarding the family of Terah (Abram's father) paint a grim picture. This Chaldean nomad from the land of Ur has three children: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. The latter also bears a child (Lot) and then dies before Terah, his father (Gen 11:27-28).

Abram, in turn, takes Sarai as his wife, of whom the hagiographer says that "she was barren and bore no children" (Gen 11:30). This is also a kind of "death", presented as the impossibility of having children. Following these heavy blows of fate, Terah leaves Ur of the Chaldeans together with those struck by misfortune: Abram and Sarai, the childless family, and Lot, who was left fatherless (Wénin 2019, 13).

The evocation of this departure (in Gen 11:31) is characterized by the insistent indication of the kinship ties that exist between these characters: "And Terah took Abraham his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his nephew, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram his son, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldees…" (Gen 11:31). In a few words, verse 31 includes six terms that indicate the degree of kinship that existed between them, terms that have the possessive adjective "his" next to them. The previous verses (Gen 11:27-29), in which the kinship ties between these characters have already been indicated, show, at first glance, that this repetition of them is unnecessary, which is why it should have a logic or a specific reason behind it, beyond being a simple biographical information offered to the reader. All these repetitions serve to characterize the kinship ties within this family, already touched by the shadow of death. The author clearly indicates the relationship of this group of people, a group dominated by the paternal figure of Terah, whose power or authority over his family is indicated by the expression: "And Terah took..." (Gen 11:31a).

However, from the original Hebrew text it is not very clear who and with whom comes out or leaves Ur of the Chaldeans; given that Terah is the subject of the verb "to take", we would expect that he is the one who "goes out" together with his son (Abraham), his grandson (Lot) and his daughter-in-law (Sarai); or he (Terah) is the one who took them out of Ur of the Chaldeans (as appears from the Septuagint and the Vulgate). However, the Masoretic tradition unanimously supports this curious variant, according to which they all came out together, or each with each, as a whole not very clearly specified; another indication – consider the exegetes – which shows us that this

family was marked by the confusion in which humanity found itself immediately after the well-known episode of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11).

Terah intended to reach Canaan, but they only went halfway (to Haran), for there Terah died. The name of this city, where Terah died, reminds us of the name of his third son (Haran), who had died before him.

So, what we consider as the "beginning" of the story of the patriarch Abraham (the text of Gen 12:1-3) is, in fact, a continuation of a narrative that began earlier. The well-known text of Gen 12:1-3 is followed by a story that, in fact, continues the tale interrupted in Haran with the mention of Terah's death.

From now on, Abram will be the one who will take on the active role of family leader: "And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all the substance that they had gathered, and all the souls that they had gotten in Haran, and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and they came into the land of Canaan" (Gen 12:5). The similarity with the text of Gen 11:31 is obvious; Abram, as the leader of his family, imitates his father; taking his own (who were already quite numerous) he seduces into the land to which his father had gone initially.

Now God intervenes and commands His servant Abram to leave his land, his people, and his father's house (Gen 12:1). After spending some time in Shechem (at the oak of Mamre), "there was a famine in the land" (where he was) and "Abram went down to Egypt" (Gen 12:10).

The famous Rabbi Moshè ben Nahman Gerondi (1194-1270) (also known by the acronym "RaMBaN", and in medieval literature as "Nahmanides"), commenting on Abram's departure to Egypt, made this statement: "Whatever happens to the father, happens to his children." He meant that Abram's departure to Egypt and his stay there for a specific period were an anticipation of what would later happen to his descendants.

Nachmanides, citing a midrashic commentary on the Book of Genesis – Genesi Rabba 40, 6 – comments on the text of Gen 12:10-20 as follows:

> "Rabbi Phineas ben Yair, in the time of Rabbi Oshaiah, said: 'God said to Abram, our father: Go and prepare the way for your children.' Indeed, you can clearly see that everything that was written about Abraham, our father, was also written about his children. Of Abraham it is written: 'There was a famine in the land' (Gen 12:10); of Israel it is written: 'For behold, the famine has been in the land for two years' (Gen 45:6); of Abraham it is said: 'Abram went down to Egypt'; of our ancestors it is written:

> 'Our fathers went down to Egypt' (Num 20:15); of Abraham it is written: 'to sojourn there' (Gen 12:10); of Israel it is said: 'We have come to sojourn in this land' (Gen 47:4)."

It was certainly tempting for Israel to read and interpret its own history through the lens of its ancestors' stories, and this was the most appropriate (and most effective) way to give new meaning to its later experiences. Israel's history was not the result of chance but was part of a foreknown plan. The figure of Abram has a unique importance in this plan, because he was the first of all the ancestors. His experiences, the events of his life, are "founding events" and have a perpetual significance. His sojourn in Egypt, the inherent dangers to which he was exposed, the intervention of the Lord in his favor, and his return to the Promised Land are not ordinary events; they contain, as in a nucleus, the promise of the future liberation that God would later bring about in favor of his people [1]. More than any other personality in the history of these people, Patriarch Abraham was destined to become a "model" or "prototype" for his descendants.

Now, the idea of making Abraham a model or paradigm has led biblical theologians to radical conclusions: one of them would be that this biblical character would be a legendary figure (Wénin 2019, 7); the intention of biblical scholars to identify a precise historical character, starting from the biblical stories and the texts we have, was an attempt doomed to failure.

But who is Abraham? Did he exist or not? We could discuss the historicity of this biblical character endlessly – whether he existed or not. Still, we are interested in something else: what we know about him from the biblical tradition. It is clear from the biblical texts that Abraham is not just a single figure, but a "prototype". The Patriarch Abraham is the man to whom the Lord reveals Himself and, at the same time, the man who seeks God; Abraham – like Adam – is one and many, because many seek God (Martini 2022, 16).

In rabbinic literature, the phrase "Abraham our father" is used very frequently, but what does it mean, and to whom does this "our" refer? What group of people or what community are we talking about when we say "our"? First of all, we think of the Hebrew community; in this community we should also look for our roots (Pontificia Commissione Biblica 2001, 46-8); but this "our" could very well mean the Islamic community (because Muslim believers also claim it) and, of course, the Christian community, because the apostle Paul states that Patriarch Abraham is "our father by faith" (Gal 3 and Rom 4) (Martini 1983, 24).

In what sense is Abraham the "ancestor" or "father" of Christians? Saint Matthew gives a first answer to this question in chapter 1 of his Gospel: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Mt 1:1). Here we find our Abrahamic paternity: Christ the Savior is a descendant of King David and of Abraham, and we are "incorporated" in Christ. We live our Christian existence to the extent that we are "incorporated" (ontologically) in Christ, and, as such, we are also "sons of Abraham". More than the descendants "according to the flesh" of Abraham (the Jews), we – Christians – are the true sons of Abraham, for to us God has fulfilled the promise made to the Patriarch Abraham: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

When we affirm that the Patriarch Abraham is "our father by faith," we go beyond a genealogical lineage and affirm that he precedes us in the act of faith or shows us what faith is (or what it means); indicates to us the way or path to God; Abraham teaches us obedience to the word of God [2]; he teaches us availability to God's commandments and total surrender into God's hands.

The life of Abraham – as presented to us in the Book of Genesis – meant a permanent pilgrimage (in the space of the Fertile Crescent) – from a precise and well-defined point to an equally well-defined "target" or "arrival point", a journey that went through several stages. If we read carefully the thirteen chapters dedicated to the patriarch Abraham in the Book of Genesis, we will notice that these chapters appear as a unit, as a pilgrimage, as a story that knows a particular path and an inevitable progress (an ascending development), with certain well-defined stages (Wénin 2019, 8).

The sources or wellsprings that tell us about Abraham are found in the Book of Genesis (but these are not the only ones). Old Testament biblical scholars generally speak of five sources: the Book of Genesis tells us about Abraham (starting with chapter 12, up to chapter 25), and among the New Testament authors, Saint Paul in several texts from the epistles to the Galatians, to the Romans, Second Corinthians, and to the Hebrews. Now, in addition to these texts (let's call them "classics"), we also have other texts in which direct or indirect allusions are made to the patriarch Abraham.

In the pages of the Old Testament, the name of Abraham is cited in the short form "Abram" 60 times, and in the long form "Abraham" 174 times. So, more than 230 citations, and in the pages of the New Testament, we have approximately 306 citations. However, the books of the Old Testament that mention Abraham are much fewer than we might think: the figure of Abraham, although important in Jewish theology, is not so

popular. It seems that later or post-exilic Judaism [3] is the one that brought the patriarch Abraham back into the focus of theological reflection. The ancient wisdom tradition [4] does not mention Abraham. He is noted, however, in the more recent wisdom tradition – the one known as the "deuterocanonical" – that is, in those books that belong to the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, but which are not also found in the Hebrew Bible, since they were written in Greek; it is clear that we are talking about more recent books (that is, written closer to the period of the New Testament). The Book of Wisdom of Solomon and the Book of Wisdom of Jesus Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) allude to the figure of the patriarch Abraham, the latter (Ecclesiastes) in the so-called "Praise to the Fathers" or "Praise to the enlightened men" (Sir 44:20-24 – it is the text dedicated to Abraham).

Only two psalms mention the name of Abraham (Ps 46 and Ps 104). In the books of the Prophets, we have seven mentions (i.e., very few), and in late texts. Very likely, the pre-exilic prophets (Hosea, Amos, Isaiah 1-39, and Micah) were not inspired by Abraham, as the prophets who followed them did. In addition, we have 18 mentions in the books of the Pentateuch. The name of the patriarch Abraham appears quite frequently in the phrase "God of Abraham", which, in fact, tells us nothing about him. It is then mentioned 15 times in historical books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Kings, 3 and 4 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Tobit, Judith, Esther, and 1 and 2 Maccabees). It could be said that the figure of the patriarch Abraham gained greater importance in the pages of Holy Scripture with the Babylonian exile (Martini 2022, 22).

In the New Testament, the patriarch Abraham is mentioned 72 times (and in the Quran, 69 times), while the great Moses is mentioned 80 times. Abraham and Moses are the biblical figures most frequently mentioned in the New Testament.

Among the mentions of Abraham in the New Testament, we will refer to those in the Gospel of the "infancy" (Mt 1:1 and Lk 1:55 and 1:73): "Jesus Christ is the son of Abraham"; "as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed, forever" and "... to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to Abraham, our father". Other places where the name of the patriarch Abraham appears are in the Gospel of John, in the well-known controversies between Jesus and the spiritual leaders of the Jews (Jn 8).

The Jewish sources that mention Abraham are numerous. As we have already mentioned, since the Babylonian exile, the Jews have reflected a lot on the figure of the biblical patriarch: Who was he? What did he do? What was his role in the history of the biblical people? These late reflections (6th century BC) lack the historical value of tradition, but they have undeniable value for the religious interpretation of the figure of

Abraham; the repatriated Jews who participated in the reconstruction of their religion felt close to Abraham and made frequent references to him. These mentions represent "first-hand testimonies", even if, sometimes, as we will see, they seem quite simplistic (almost puerile), but, in their apparent naivety, the rabbis said amazing things, because they mastered very well the art of saying profound things with the help of short stories, in little stories; they proposed a brief statement and said things that invited reflection.

Two reference names of Hellenistic Judaism: firstly, Philo of Alexandria who has many treatises on Abraham: "De Abrahamo", "De migratione Abrahami", "Quis rerum divinarum heres sit" (Who is the heir of the divine promises?), "De congressuquærendæ eruditionis gratia" (On meeting for the sake of seeking and learning), "De fuga et invention" (On search and discovery) and "De mutatione nominum" (On the change of names), and secondly, the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, who in his best-known and most voluminous work – Jewish Antiquities – tells, in his own way, the entire history of Abraham.

In these Jewish sources, we can see how ancient authors related to this biblical figure, doing what we today, after 2000 years, try to do: we try to understand Abraham starting from our own religious situation (from our concrete faith). This is what Philo of Alexandria did: he made a hermeneutic of the stories about Abraham, trying to answer the question: "What exactly is the patriarch Abraham telling me?"; "In reality, I am Abraham!". Philo of Alexandria read the story of Abraham from a religious perspective. Josephus did the same, and in a much more determined manner, rabbinical Judaism did the same, in a fundamental text called "Haggadot", but also the rabbinical stories about Abraham's childhood and deeds.

Islamic sources that speak of Abraham are also quite numerous, because the Islamic religion takes the figure of Abraham very seriously.

We also have, as is known, Christian literature that refers to the figure of the biblical patriarch: first, patristic literature. Even if it did not produce treatises on Abraham, as it did for Moses, through Saint Gregory of Nyssa, it nevertheless makes many references to the patriarch Abraham.

In addition to the works of the Holy Fathers, the figure of the patriarch Abraham is as present as possible in spiritual reflection on Abraham, in worship, in sacred art, in iconography, and in modern literature.

Finally, I think we can add here – although it may seem a bit haphazard – our own or personal reflection on this biblical character; without claiming to give this

reflection an exegetical value, I could ask myself: "How do I read (or see) the experience of this biblical character?"; each of us – if we claim to have faith in God – experiences Abraham: the experience of his calling, the experience of his pilgrimage, the experience of his God, the harrowing experiences of his existence: hasn't God asked me too to leave some things behind? Doesn't he ask me, sometimes, to believe and hope against all hope and despite everything I see happening around me? Has he never asked us to sacrifice what we had most dear and precious? Doesn't he ask us to be faithful to the covenant made with Him?

Struggle with God, and He will bless you

Before analyzing the New Testament texts that describe Christ the Savior as "son of Abraham" and us, Christians, as "sons of Abraham by faith," I would like to analyze how the patriarch Abraham encountered God, because this man – with the help of the Most High – broke the string of misfortunes that befell him and his family, becoming for many a "source of blessing" (Gen 12:3).

The Book of Genesis presents Abraham as a prophet and a man open to the sacred. Still, he had no children and no hope of ever having any: "Behold, I die childless, and the steward of my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (Gen 15:2). Thus began his pilgrimage or journey through the Fertile Crescent, accompanied only by a promise that seemed rhetorical and unlikely: "Look up to heaven and count the stars, if you can count them! [...] So many will be your descendants" (Gen 15:5).

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews states that Abraham showed faith in God because, when he was called, he obeyed and "went out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance, and he went out not knowing whither he went" (Heb 11:8).

The author of Genesis states that "Abram believed the Lord" and "it was counted to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). This is the well-known verse so highly regarded by the Apostle Paul, who saw in it the core or essence of his theology of justification by faith, a theology that he would develop in the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Romans (Dizionario di Paolo edelle sue Lettere 1999, 2).

Faith is an act of courage and an act of trust; the Hebrew verb that expresses this act of trust, which has become our "Amen", conveys stability, the act of relying on someone or something, and the complete entrustment of a person or a project. Therefore, believing is also a risky act of trust, because the one in whom you have put your trust (man, not God) can disappoint you [5].

Therefore, faith can also be seen as a risky act because God escapes our senses and powers; for this reason, faith is not entirely free from the threat of fear and suspicion. The glimmers of light of faith are always accompanied (like a shadow) by darkness in an uninterrupted counterpoint.

In a famous work entitled "Does God Exist?" (Existiert Gott?), its author, Hans Küng, stated that faith:

> "Does not guarantee absolute certainty: in the act of faith, one does not start from a demonstration or a logical explanation of the existence of God to then arrive at a firm conviction. A trusting attitude is not preceded by rational knowledge. The reality of God's presence is not proposed to our reason with indisputable authority. We are talking, rather, about an inner rationality that legitimizes certainty."

The statement that "Abram believed the Lord" (Gen 15:6) is followed by an interesting and suggestive episode that shows us that Abram, however, needed more than a word – be it from the Lord – to be convinced that he had not followed sick imaginations. Abram dared to ask the Lord: "Lord God, (after) how will I know that I will inherit this land (of the Promise)?" (Gen 15:8). Other questions raised by some protagonists of the history of salvation in the Law of Grace come to mind: "How will I know this? For I am old and my wife is well advanced in years" (Lk 1:18) or "How will this be, since I do not know man?" (Lk 1:34).

And the Lord offers his servant a test after, beforehand, asking him for a truculent ritual (a kind of oath or covenant). At sunset, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, darkness and fear seized him (Gen 15:12). The theophany of the Lord involves bringing man into contact with that "mistero tremendum", and sleep (dream) and night vision are the symbolic representation of the need for a different way to meet the Most High (Ravasi 2020, 68-69.).

It seems that the Lord accepted the challenge of His servant and committed Himself to a unilateral and gratuitous covenant (Moldovan 2019, 204-12); the time had not yet come for the Lord to ask something of His servant, but this will happen soon (Gen 17 – circumcision). Man has no choice but to accept the Lord's covenant (and His promise) through faith or to reject it through distrust and unbelief. The reasons for faith are ultimately based on the Lord's faithfulness to His word and to His promises.

We often hear God – in the pages of Holy Scripture – swearing by Himself (Gen 22:16; Ps 109:4; Jer 51:14; Am 6:8; Heb 7:21).

At that time, numerous lineages and the inheritance of a land were only "promises" or "promises" that were anchored exclusively in the word (oath) of the Lord: "To your descendants I will give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Gen 15:18).

Abram had before him a distant horizon to which he would head, traveling a long and tiring itinerary that represents a paradigm of the act of faith. This act depends exclusively on the promise of the Lord.

The French theologian Oscar Cullmann said that "to believe is to abstract from myself and contemplate an event that does not require my collaboration". Abram collaborated with God: the ritual he prepared (described in detail in chapter 15 of the Book of Genesis) would represent the occasion of the divine theophany. The act of faith does not mean "sacred magic", and man is not a puppet moved by an implacable destiny. There is a famous phrase attributed to the Sufi Muslim mystic Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273): "We, O Lord, are the lutes; You are the singer. Are you not the One Who sighs while singing? We are the flutes, but the breath in them is Yours, O God! We are the mountains, but the echo that is heard in the valleys is Yours, O Lord!". This oriental vision of Rumi is rejected by the authors of Holy Scripture, who describe man as an active partner of the Lord in the act of faith.

In the life of the patriarch Abraham, the act of faith managed to reach the deepest, absolute and tragic stage, being devoid of any human, rational or religious support: his son by promise (Isaac), the one who represented the tangible proof of the possibility of a numerous lineage, had to be sacrificed, so that the biblical patriarch could give up even the support of paternity and no longer have even the reasons of flesh and blood to believe in the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord had made to him (Gen 12:1-3), but only those of the divine word. This, according to biblical scholars, is the reason God asked His servant to destroy the human bond "father-son". After the test was over, Abraham would receive Isaac back not as a son, but as a divine "promise," as a free and absolute grace; this was also earlier (son of a promise), but now (after the test of Abraham's faith) this fact is as evident as can be. It is no coincidence that the biblical author of the book of Genesis, at the end of this dramatic episode that took place on Mount Moriah, will resume the blessing that the Lord gave to the patriarch Abraham at the beginning: "I will bless you with my blessing and multiply your descendants as the stars of the sky

and as the sand on the seashore [...] and through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen 22:17-18).

The Son and Sons of Abraham in the Law of Grace

As we have seen, the name and figure of the patriarch Abraham appear in several places in the New Testament writings. The first texts to which I will refer are contained in the Gospel of the "infancy" of Jesus, in both its variants (Mt 1-2 and Lk 1-2).

The first New Testament text that makes a precise reference to the patriarch Abraham is the very text that opens the collection of books of the New Testament (the Gospel according to Matthew): it is the text from Matthew 1:1: "The book of the generation (of the birth) of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

The title "son of Abraham" appears only here in the Gospel of Matthew. Its meaning is not primarily a Christological one, unlike the other title with which the Savior Christ is indicated, that of "son of David" (from the same verse), which clearly has a Christological meaning; "Son of David" is a Christological title frequently used in the pages of the Holy Gospel (Mt 9:27; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9). "Son of Abraham" indicates, primarily, Christ's belonging to the people of Israel, according to the prophetic texts evoked above in Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-6 and 17:1-21. However, we cannot wholly exclude the messianic dimension implicit in the promise that God made to the patriarch Abraham. This promise would be fulfilled within his lineage, as it appears in apocryphal literature (despite later Christian interventions on these texts) [6].

To understand the importance of a genealogy in ancient societies, we should leave aside our modern mentality a little, because today we have multiple possibilities to find out the identity of a person, to know their roots, their social and family traditions, and try to think about the condition in which the people of that time were, deprived of modern means, people who entrusted their past, family affairs or the ties of the clan to which they belonged to memory and tradition. In such a cultural and religious context, genealogy had a decisive and indispensable importance. It had a mnemonic function, but also an ethno-legal purpose, which allowed the preservation (or conservation) of the memory of the nation or tribe to which someone belonged, to demonstrate someone's belonging to a particular family or social group, or when it came to claiming the right to a territory or property.

As it is an instrument based on orality, we should not expect historical accuracy from a genealogy, especially since those historical circumstances "generally preferred a

qualitative history to a statistical or documentary history" (Ramlot 1964, 53). Biblical genealogy represents a special literary genre that must be understood and respected, avoiding recourse to criteria that are foreign to it and that hinder the understanding of its message: "Biblical genealogy lives in symbiosis with history: it is not conceived as the main means of historical transmission; in fact, however, it could be one of its vehicles. Historical reliability must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis" (Orsatti 1980, 30-3).

To correctly understand a biblical genealogy, it is imperative to determine the purpose for which it was developed and transmitted to posterity. Its form also depends on its purpose or finality. The main characteristic of biblical genealogy, unlike that found in ancient cultures and even in biblical Judaism, is theological finality. In the pages of Holy Scripture, genealogy is at the service of God's plan of salvation and the transmission of His blessing from generation to generation: "Thus, each generation of people bears the seal of the blessing of God, who is present in history and Who travels alongside them" (Kazhuthadiyil 2009, 92), as he once traveled with Patriarch Abraham.

For our study, it is of particular importance that the biblical story about Noah is introduced with a genealogy of Adam: "The Book of the Names of Adam" (Gen 5:1); the story about Abraham is also preceded by a genealogy: "Now this is the history of the family of Shem" (Gen 11:10-26); The Books of Chronicles or Paralipomena present us with genealogies of the kings of Israel and Judah (1 Chr 1-2).

These genealogies indeed served Saint Matthew when he considered presenting the Savior's human origins; moreover, we could say that, by beginning his Gospel with a genealogy, the evangelist sought to place his story within the continuity of the cycles of biblical history. The same phenomenon can be observed in Hellenistic and Roman biographies, which, in most cases, begin with the presentation of the ancestors of the story's main character (Davies and Allison 1988, 187).

In a very special way, the "header" of the Gospel of Matthew – *Βίβλος γενέσεως* [Heb. *sēfer tôledōt*], placed emphatically at the beginning of the writing, and which marks a new start by telling the story of the birth of the Savior, refers to the text in Gn 2:4: "*Βίβλος γενέσεως* [Heb. *sēfer tôledōt*] of the heavens and the earth from their creation..." and to that in Gen 5:1: "*Βίβλος γενέσεως* of Adam." The Savior Christ appears as a "point of arrival," but also as a "recapitulation" of world history. Professor Ulrich Luz called the genealogy of the Savior a "stenogram of the history of Israel" (Luz 2006, I, 148); moreover, the genealogy is a "theology of history" that found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

If in the old genealogies the ancestor was the one who conferred prestige and importance on his descendants, in the Matthewian genealogy of the Savior, the emphasis is placed, at its beginning and at its end, on the Descendant who confers theological meaning and finality on His ancestors and the entire history of the biblical people. Not only do the patriarch Abraham and King David derive their importance from Christ, but all the patriarchal and royal generations, as well as the post-exilic ones (Mt 1:17).

In this way, the evangelist showed us that Christ represents the fulfillment of the Lord's promises made to His chosen ones, starting with the patriarch Abraham. With Christ and with His incarnation in history, eternity flows into time, the last phase of history (eschatology) begins: Jesus Christ is the "arrival point" of the messianic expectation; He is "Immanuel," the One who is with us and remains with us until the end of the ages. Christ came for all the descendants of Abraham, but not only for them (that is, not only for those who are of his seed), but also for those born "of his faith," given that God has power to raise "children of Abraham even from stones" (Mt 3:9).

The genealogy of the Savior, placed by Saint Matthew as the "incipit" of his Gospel, is not only intentional but also has overwhelming theological importance. Every ancient writer tried to express, from the very beginning of his work, his intentions and the purpose pursued [7], to direct the readers' attention to that purpose.

Perhaps some exegetes exaggerated when they said that the Matthewic genealogy was "a miniature Gospel," but we cannot deny its importance compared to the rest of the Gospel.

The formula at the beginning of the Gospel – *Βίβλος γενέσεως* (Heb. *sēfer tôledōt*) has been much discussed among exegetes, who have interpreted it in different ways. The most obvious and straightforward meaning of the word Βίβλος is that of "book" (translation adopted by most exegetes). Still, there is no shortage of those who translate the word *Βίβλος* with the "document" of the birth, emphasizing the connection intended by Saint Matthew between the genealogy and the pericope that relates how Christ was conceived and born (Brown 1981, 76-8).

Joachim Gnilka translated the term *Βίβλος* with "certificate" or "attestation" of the origin of Jesus Christ, linking verse 1 to the genealogy and the two introductory chapters (Gnilka 1990, 29-30). Ulrich Luz reaffirms the usual or ordinary meaning of "book", being, in his opinion, "almost impossible to have at the beginning of a book a word or expression whose meaning is that of "writing", "document" or "testimony", even if we are talking about a text with a Hebrew background.

Even the second term of the expression *γενέσεως* has been translated in several ways: "origin," "genesis," "generation," "genealogy," "birth," but always with strict reference to the genealogy that follows.

The first direct reference to the phrase *Βίβλος γενέσεως* "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" refers to genealogy; the reference of the first verse to genealogy is confirmed by v. 18, which repeats the words of verse 1.

Starting from this observation, we can develop or amplify the meaning of the expression *Βίβλος γενέσεως*, seeing in Mt 1:1 the "beginning" (incipit) of the first two chapters of the Gospel, but also of the initial section: Mt 1:1 – 4:12, but also of the entire Matthewic work, and – why not? – of the new creation inaugurated by Christ the Savior. We need to consider the fact that every writer is meticulous about how he begins his work, showing – right from its first lines – its density and scope.

The center of gravity of the first verse (Mt 1:1) and of the entire genealogy is the Savior Christ: He is the object and protagonist of *Βίβλος γενέσεως*; all the previous blessings of God and all His promises are directed to Christ; to Christ all attention is directed, and to Him all the previous blessings are directed.

Verse 1, therefore, Christologically orients the entire genealogy, the "infancy" Gospel, and the whole of the Matthew Gospel.

For the Savior Christ, having His human origin in Abraham represents the sign of His belonging to the community or people of the Covenant and the condition for being recognized as "Savior of His people" (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31-33; Jn 4:22; Heb 2:16-17). Thus, the title "son of Abraham" indicates the Savior Christ as "son and savior of Israel." Still, the same title lends itself to a broader interpretation, since it is in God's power to raise children of Abraham even from stones (Mt 3:9).

The Evangelist Matthew emphasizes through the expression "son of Abraham" the universality of salvation and the entry into the promise made to the biblical patriarch of all peoples: "And I say to you that many from the east and the west will come and sit down at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:11-12). At the end of the first Gospel, as a seal, Christ the Savior will command His apostles to make disciples in all nations (Mt 28:18-20). God calls all people to salvation, a fact indicated by Saint Matthew and the episode of the Magi from the East (Valentini 2013, 51).

Saint Matthew's vision is much broader than that expressed in the genealogy of the Savior. Still, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that, through Matthew's narration of the "Christ event, "we are dealing with a deepening, a development, and an essential change in the significance of the Abrahamic lineage of Jesus" (Luz 2006, 151). Although the "header" of the Gospel is closely linked to the genealogy of the Savior, it has an overwhelming importance – both in perspective and in retrospect – being a kind of "summary" of the entire Matthewian theology (Gnilka 1990, 30).

If, in the Gospel heading, Abraham is the last name, the same name will be the first at the beginning of the Savior's genealogical tree, serving as a kind of "linking word" between the Gospel title and the genealogical list of Jesus. Abraham is at the origin of the Jewish nation and of the biblical people, and, as such, he is the ancestor of both David and Christ. I do not think it is unimportant to recall here that, according to a tradition, Abraham was a king [8], and this fact could have suggested to Saint Matthew the idea of starting the royal genealogy of the Savior precisely with the patriarch Abraham, in whose lineage King David would later be found (Valentini 2013, 53).

As I have already said, in the pages of the Old Testament – without considering the texts of the Book of Genesis – the patriarch Abraham is rarely mentioned. When this happens, the biblical patriarch is discussed together with his descendants: Isaac and Jacob/Israel (Wénin 2015, 69). The figure of the patriarch Abraham acquires greater importance in the sacred texts written during the Babylonian exile and in the post-exilic period, when an attempt was made to restore Judaism after the tragic event of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and after the return from Babylon. The recourse to Abraham was necessary because it highlighted the gratuitousness of Israel's choice and, consequently, laid the foundations for a new beginning, despite the loss of the Promised Land and national identity.

The great Moses, being a prophet, foresaw the infidelity that the people of Israel would show to their God and its consequence: the loss of the land and the holy place (Deut 4:23-32). If the Covenant of Mount Sinai, repeatedly broken, did not seem to give Israel the feeling of a lasting bond with its God, the covenant concluded by the Lord with the patriarch Abraham (Gen. ch. 15), since it was a unilateral oath of God, acquired an overwhelming importance; This explains the more frequent references to this biblical figure in the second part of the book of the prophet Isaiah: Israel is "the servant of the Lord" (Ebed-Yahweh), chosen by the Lord and "the seed of Abraham, My beloved. I have taken you (a clear reference to the text in Gen 12:1-3) from the farthest

ends of the earth, and called you from its remotest corners, and said to you: You are My servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off" (Is 41:8-9) or "Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who bore you in pain. For I called him alone, I blessed him and multiplied him" (Is 51:2).

The song of the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:46-55) also follows this line, presenting the patriarch Abraham to us in the context of the history of salvation (which began precisely with the choice of this Aramaean) and continued with all the subsequent interventions of God in favor of the people born from Abraham's loins (Valentini 2017, 199). Like Saint Matthew (1:1), Saint Luke – in the song of the Virgin Mary – mentions two prominent personalities of biblical history: "He has supported Jacob/Israel, his servant (here we have a communal sense, indicating the entire people), to remember his mercy. As he spoke to our fathers – and here the ancestor of all is mentioned -, to Abraham [9] and to his seed (descendant) forever" (Lk 1:54-55). The connection with the patriarch Abraham, the friend and servant of God, uniquely qualifies his seed (or offspring), which was born from his loins and belongs to him, as appears in the use of the possessive pronoun *αὐτοῦ*. This belonging represents the essential and identifying element of the people of the Covenant in relation to God, to whom Abraham showed faith, and, precisely because of his faith, he was ordained "father of a numerous offspring". We cannot think of Abraham and the promise that the Lord made to him, without thinking of the offspring of the biblical patriarch, who is the object of divine blessing.

Jesus' Controversies with the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles

Chapter 8 of the Gospel of John presents the teaching shared by Christ the Savior to the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles: "And about the middle of the feast, Jesus went up into the temple and taught" (Jn 7:14). In the second part of His discourse, the patriarch Abraham is the reference character, from beginning to end. However, his role in the history of salvation is framed in a broader picture, dominated by the "paternal" figure, not so much as a "father", but as an "ancestor", from whom his descendants could learn how to be and behave (Dufour 2007, 577).

The Evangelist John first states that "many of the Jews believed in Jesus" (Jn 8:30), and it seems that what Jesus says next is addressed precisely to those Jews who believed in Him. However, this group of Jews favorable to the Savior does not seem to be very clearly distinguished from His declared opponents. When He told them that "the knowledge of the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32), they replied: "We are Abraham's

seed and have never been slaves to anyone" (Jn 8:33). We do not know precisely to which group of Jews the Lord is addressing His words, given that His audience has not changed. The misunderstanding on this point is further accentuated because, in v. 45, Jesus states (with a hint of reproach): "You do not believe Me."

Thus, from v. 31 to v. 45, we have the first development of the theme, starting with the expression "to believe in." Verse 46 takes up this expression (in a negative sense) and serves as a transition to a second argument (Jn 8:46-59), centered on the person of the Savior Christ.

Thus, the text begins (in v. 31) with an invitation addressed to Jesus' disciple: "he who follows me" (Jn 8:12), who is now invited to "remain in his word." The disciple of Christ must "keep his word" (Jn 8:51), just as Christ Himself "keeps the word of the Father who sent him into the world" (Jn 8:55).

The question implied in the passage we are considering (Jn 8:31-58) is the following: "Who can claim divine filiation?" or "Who can call himself a son of God?" If in the famous hymnic Prologue, the evangelist affirmed that "to those who received Christ and believed in his name, the Lord gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12) – to those who were "born of God" –, in chapter 8, the theme of birth from God is resumed. Along with the blessing and promise the Lord shared with the patriarch Abraham, the Lord showed His people (descendants of Abraham) that He is the only true God and that, precisely in this capacity, He proposes a covenant to the descendants of the biblical patriarch. The bond that the Lord wants to propose to Israel is often framed in the binomial "father/son" or "parent/child," language that denotes closeness and intimacy in a mutual relationship of love. For the Jews who listen to the word of Christ and who "believe in Him," the word that He addresses to them obliges them to fulfill the truth, a service on which their eternal destiny depends. But did they understand this?

According to the theology of the biblical prophets, the "full" or "perfect" knowledge of God will be the gift par excellence that the Lord will offer to the world in the "fullness of time" [10]. Jesus announces in the future: "If you remain in my word, you will know the truth" (Jn 8:31-32a).

Since the Old Testament – starting with the patriarch Abraham – God has addressed the people of the Covenant, and now Christ reveals to the Jews what form of communion the Lord has called the descendants of Abraham to; not receiving (or accepting) Christ is equivalent to belonging only in an illusory manner to the seed of

Abraham: to be the sons or seed of Abraham is comparable to living as Abraham lived, following him in his example of faith.

"We have one Father, God" – The Jews said to Christ (Jn 8:41); in fact, the Savior knowingly led them to this statement, which represents the core or center of His debate or controversy with the Jews. In reality, the attitude towards Christ represents the test or proof of divine filiation: although you are "Abraham's seed" – Christ tells the Jews – yet "you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you" (Jn 8:37); although you claim Abrahamic descent, yet you do not do the deeds of your ancestor, Abraham (Jn 8:39). In this way, by presenting to us the attitude and teaching of Christ, an expectation is created in His audience, and what He is about to say to the Jews will obviously shock them: "You are of your father the devil" (Jn 8:44). The accusation is terrible, but it is also motivated: "Because you cannot obey My word" and "Now you seek to kill Me."

After this terrible statement that certainly shocked and angered them, only Jesus remains on the scene of the story: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56).

The biblical prophets drew the attention of the people of Israel that the promises that the Lord had made to them in the past and the Holy Place in Jerusalem had become for them a kind of "talisman" that protected them – supposedly – from any danger or threat from the Lord (Jer 7); the Abrahamic lineage, in the ethnic sense, ended up bitterly deceiving the Jews, instilling in their minds a kind of deceptive security and a foolish sense of superiority (Moldovan 2018, 47). The fracture between faith and deeds is a theme dear to the biblical prophets [11]. Even the rabbinical texts of the first century denounce the same incoherence among Abraham's descendants, who lack the humble heart of their ancestor (Strack and Billerbeck 1924, 523). The unbelieving generation of Jews contemporary with the Savior has nothing to do with the posterity of the biblical patriarch, even if, ethnically, they are the "seed of Abraham."

The issue of Abraham's true lineage was discussed at length in early Christianity: the call to repentance addressed by the Forerunner of the Lord to his contemporaries – and especially to the leaders of the people (the Pharisees and Sadducees) bears witness to this: "Therefore bear fruit worthy of repentance. And do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you that God is able from these stones to raise children to Abraham" (Mt 3:8-9). If the unbelieving generation contemporary to the Savior boasts of their Abrahamic lineage, the Lord denounces the inconsistency of the

sons of the biblical patriarch: "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham" (Jn 8:39).

In His discussion with the religious leaders of the Jews, Jesus wants to show them that the real problem is not their descent from Abraham; in fact, the Lord does not deny this aspect: "I know that you are Abraham's seed" (Jn 8:37), but the problem is their relationship with God and with His Messenger: the refusal or rejection of Christ, Who "came forth from God" (Jn 16:30), clearly shows that their relationship with God is compromised.

By faith, Abraham rejoiced fully because he contemplated the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord had made to him: the salvation itself, the prefiguration of which was the birth of Isaac (the son according to the promise). The words: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it (by faith) and was glad" (Jn 8:56) represent a splendid affirmation of the unity of divine Revelation that culminated in Christ, for the fulfillment of the promise was already contained in its formulation (Gn 12:1-3).

Patriarch Abraham – the father of those who are saved by faith

The Holy Apostle Paul will clearly and unequivocally state that the divine filiation that Christ procured for us through His saving work fulfilled and perfected the choice of Abraham and the promise that the Lord made to him (Gal 3:16): the disciple of Christ (the Christian), whatever his origin (Jewish or pagan) is the beneficiary of the blessing granted by God to Abraham, the father of those who are saved through faith (Dufour 2007, 579-80).

Saint Paul, who was "a Jew by nature" (Gal 2:15), had received rabbinical training, being a disciple of the famous rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 5:34). Although this training sometimes shines through in his exegesis of Old Testament texts, his interpretation is nevertheless entirely new, since he reads and explains the Holy Scriptures from a Christian perspective (Mihoc 1983, 267). Christ the Savior is the center of his theology and the permanent point of reference of his exegesis.

The text of Gal 3:6-18 provides one of the most interesting examples of Pauline exegesis or interpretation of the Old Testament (Davies 1980). The scriptural argument for the Pauline principle of justification by faith revolves around the figure of the patriarch Abraham, whose name appears seven times in this passage. This biblical figure is essential to St. Paul's argument as the father of Israel (Schreiner 2022, 193).

According to the book of Genesis, Abraham is the first Jew (Gen 14:13) and the father of the Jews (Is 51:2; 3 Mc 6:3), that is, of the circumcised. Saint Paul's argument proves that, from a spiritual point of view, the patriarch Abraham is the father of all those saved by faith, regardless of their religious background (whether Jewish or pagan). Abraham received God's blessing before the Law was given (in the time of Moses); Abraham showed faith in the Lord, and his faith was counted to him as righteousness. Therefore, Saint Paul states, the true sons of Abraham receive God's blessing as the biblical patriarch received it, not from the works of the Law (which was not in force at that time), but through faith in Jesus Christ.

The patriarch Abraham was blessed by faith, and the Scripture says that in Abraham all nations will be blessed. The Pauline principle of justification by faith thus finds its verification and confirmation in the Old Testament itself (Mihoc 1983, 268). Abraham preceded the Christian believers in the "obedience of faith." The apostle Paul quotes word for word the text of Gen 15:6 (according to the Septuagint): "And Abram believed the Lord; and it was counted to him for righteousness." Abraham's faith was based on the conviction that God was powerful enough to fulfill what he had promised. In fact, what had the Lord pledged to him? That He would raise numerous offspring for him, even though he was old and his wife was barren. Abram believed God at his word—against all hope—and, as a result, he was declared or counted righteous before God. Thus, the conclusion cannot be other than that formulated by Saint Paul in Gal 3:6-7: "Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, know therefore that those who are of faith, the same are children of Abraham." Since Abraham was justified by faith, it follows that those who believe, those who have faith, are members of Abraham's family.

However, the apostle Paul also presents a biblical argument, citing Gen 12:3 and Gen 18:18, which state that, through Abraham, all the families of the earth will be blessed. It is important to emphasize that Saint Paul quotes the text of Gen 12:3 after quoting the text of Gen 15:6. Therefore, the text of Gen 15:6 functions as a lens through which the text of Gen 12:3 is interpreted. Indeed, in Gal 3:8 the apostle Paul considers the promise of universal blessing (of all the families of the earth) to be the gospel, and he interprets this blessing in terms of justification by faith. The blessing that the Lord granted to the patriarch Abraham cannot be separated from those who are the children of Abraham. For this reason, in the next verse, Saint Paul draws the natural conclusion: "Those who

are of faith – Christian believers – are blessed together with faithful Abraham" (Gal 3:9) (Schreiner 2022, 194).

The statement in Gal 3:7 appears to be a thesis: those who believe are sons of Abraham. Perhaps, through this statement, Saint Paul is combating the claim of the Judaizers who preached in Galatia: that Christians from among the pagans could enter the "seed" or "descendants" of the patriarch Abraham by practicing circumcision and observing the Law of Moses. The Apostle Paul is categorical: the only way to become a son of Abraham is the way of faith in Christ, because salvation in Christ, heralded by the Holy Gospel, is the very fulfillment of the promises made by God to Abraham and his offspring (Gal 3:16), the "Descendant" being Christ, the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1) (Mihoc 1983, 270).

The Savior Christ is the descendant par excellence of Abraham (Gal 3:16), and faith is the criterion of belonging to the lineage of Abraham; "those of faith" are "the seed of Abraham" (Gal 3:29; Rom 4:13.16.18). Even in the pages of the Old Testament, the term "son" was used not only in a natural (genetic) sense, but also in a spiritual sense (Ps 34:12; Pr 1:10; 2:1; 3:1). The quality of "son" is intrinsically linked to the idea of inheritance (Gn 15:2-3; 21:10). Therefore, Saint Paul will continue to show that the sons of faith (Christian believers) are the heirs of the blessing that God gave to the patriarch Abraham.

The apostle Paul identifies God's blessing to the patriarch Abraham with justification by faith. The blessing the Lord once gave to the biblical patriarch was fulfilled at the coming of faith, for through faith, Christian believers receive "the promise of the Spirit" (Gal 3:14).

What is the connection between faith and the blessing promised by God to Abraham? Saint Paul's argument is based on the faith of the biblical patriarch. Abraham's condition, justified before God by faith, did not depend on the covenant concluded later (Gen 17) or on the observance of the Law (which was not given at that time). As such, the promise made by God to Abraham does not depend on the Law: the promise that Abraham would have numerous offspring in the future is not limited to his physical offspring (according to the flesh). Still, it is extended to his spiritual offspring (that is, to those who believe or are saved by faith). The transmission of the effects of the divine promise to Abraham's descendants could not depend on the Mosaic Law, and Saint Paul was convinced – although he was "a Jew by nature" – that the Law of Moses could not be the norm or condition for the justification of people. If the Law were enough, then what

would have been the role of faith? The Mosaic Law could not determine who would be the heir of God's promise (Fitzmyer 1999, 458).

The justification of people by the grace of God and by faith in Jesus Christ does not abrogate the Mosaic Law. Still, it validates it because, for Saint Paul, the principle of justification by faith has a solid foundation in the Old Testament. The Pauline argument is based exclusively on Scripture (especially the Book of Genesis). The Apostle Paul appeals to the inspired word of God, accepted as such by both Jews and Christians, as a formulation of divine truth.

Abraham was found righteous because of his faith and considered by God Himself as "the father of many nations"; not even his advanced age and Sarah's sterility constituted an obstacle to Abraham's faith, and when the Lord God asked him for a radical act of faith (the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah) he knew how to hope in the word of the Lord and not to waver in his faith. Abraham's example shows us how we should interpret what God accomplished in His Son, Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul extracts the following message from these examples: God's words preserved in the Book of Genesis about Abraham's faith and his righteousness were written for the believers of future generations: Christian believers are those who put their hope in God Who brought the world into existence and Who redeemed it through His Son, raising Him from the dead and making Him "the beginning of the resurrection of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20. 23).

The classic texts of the Pauline argument for justification by faith—Gal 3 and Rom 4—are not the only ones in which the patriarch Abraham is mentioned. In other texts, the apostle Paul presents himself as "a descendant of Abraham." When God asked him to listen to Sarah's advice and cast out Hagar and her son, he added these words: "... listen to her [Sarah's] voice; for it is through Isaac (the son of promise) that your descendants will be called" (Gen 21:12).

Starting from the idea that the word of God remains forever, Saint Paul argues – in chapters 9-11 of the Epistle to the Romans – that "not all who are of Israel are Israelites" and that "not all because they are descendants of Abraham are they children", for "it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants" (Rom 9:6-8). Through Isaac, the patriarch Abraham was given a numerous lineage, as promised (Dizionario di Paolo edelle sue Lettere 1999, 13).

In Rom 11:1, Saint Paul defines (or presents) himself as an "Israelite" and as a "seed of Abraham." If we consider the previous argument (Rom 9-10), we can believe and affirm that the apostle is not referring here to his Jewish heritage in an ethnic sense. The hardening of Israel made possible the salvation of the Gentiles. The mistake of the Jews represented "the wealth of the world and of the Gentiles" (Rom 11:12), who were "grafted" into the natural olive tree, because of faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 11:20). In the Pauline argument the "hardening" of the Jews occurred in the case of the majority of them, but not in the case of all the Jews; quoting the text from 1Kgs 19:18 "I have reserved for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal," the apostle Paul states that "a remnant chosen by grace" or "a faithful remnant" (Rom 11:5) received Christ and the salvation brought by Him to the whole world, so that, "as regards the Gospel [most Jews] are enemies, but as regards the [divine] election they are beloved for the fathers' sake, for the gifts (divine promises) and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:28-29).

According to Pauline theology, Jews in the ethnic sense – although they were cut off from the natural olive tree – will be reinstated among the descendants of Abraham, not because of their fidelity to the Mosaic Law but through their coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

Instead of conclusions

It is interesting and suggestive that Saint Paul – "a Jew by nature" –, responding to his opponents (the Judaizers), defines himself as "the seed of Abraham": "Are they Jews? I am a Jew too. Are they Israelites? I am an Israelite too. Are they the seed of Abraham? I am too" (2 Cor 11:22). However, in this self-characterization the apostle is not thinking only of his ethnic descent, but especially of his belonging to Christ. Professor Ralph P. Martin believes that Saint Paul applies this term and this status to himself "as an honorific sign with which he emphasizes his new Christian identity before his opponents" (Martin 1986, 375). Not coincidentally, in the following passage [12] (2 Cor 11:22-28), the apostle will present to us his sufferings or tribulations in the service of the Gospel of Christ. These sufferings represent "the seal of his apostleship in the Lord" (1 Cor 9:2).

Our faith is a perpetual conquest; we must work on its construction every day. Faith indicates the permanent status of the authentic Christian and of any person who has a creed. Faith is not a reality acquired once and for all, but a fragile conquest that

must always be protected or defended, because it is constantly threatened by doubt and skepticism, but also by superficiality; our faith is always "in the works" or "in the making", it is always "under construction", both at the personal and community levels (Moldovan 2022, 15).

Faith must be modeled after the example of Abraham, "the father of the faithful"; it is and will remain, until "the vision as in a mirror or in a riddle" (1 Cor 13:12) passes, an act of courage rooted or grounded, from the beginning, in the word of God, and "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) in the word of Christ.

Notes

[1] The first Christians interpreted the Old Testament texts or stories "in a Christological key". It is very likely that the "Magnificat", for example, the song of the Holy Virgin (Lk 1:46-55) was originally a Judeo-Christian song of praise and thanksgiving for the salvation achieved by the Lord in favor of "His poor" who represented the "rest" or "remnant" of faithful "chosen by grace" of Israel (Rom 11:5). It is possible that this hymn – put by Saint Luke into the mouth of the Mother of God – was born and sung within the community of the "Poor of Yahweh" (Anawim). Several indications lead us to this hypothesis: the hymn speaks of a salvation already achieved; it pays special attention to the figure of the patriarch Abraham and his descendants, using the expression "our fathers". All this indicates the Judeo-Christian origin of this song (George 1978, 442-5).

[2] From the perspective of the New Testament authors – especially Saint Luke – the promise that God once made to the patriarch Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) goes beyond the borders of Israel. Saint John the Baptist will speak in a new way about the lineage of the patriarch Abraham: "Therefore, produce fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father!' For I tell you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Lk 3:8) (Moldovan 2011, 229).

[3] This term refers to a phenomenon that emerged in the 6th century BC – more precisely, after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile (538/536 BC) – also known as the "Second Temple era". Other specialists date the birth of this phenomenon to the beginning of the Christian era, or even to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD (Martini 2022, 21).

[4] The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible (Book of Job, Book of Psalms, Book of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) does not speak of Abraham.

[5] In the pulpit prayer, speaking to God, we ask Him not to abandon those who have put their hope in Him.

[6] See, for example, Testament of Levi 8, 15. The text of Jer 33:21-22 and the Targum

on Ps 88:4 associate the promise made to the patriarch Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:7) with the promise made by the Lord to King David and his seed (2 Sam 7:12). The presentation of Jesus as "son of David" and as "son of Abraham" (from Mt 1:1) could indicate the traditional equation: seed of Abraham–seed of David–Messiah. (Davies and Allison 1988, 159.)

[7] The other evangelists did the same (each in their own way): Mk 1:1; Lk 1:1-4 and Jn 1:1-18.

[8] Babylonian Talmud: Sanhedrin 108b; Gen. Rab at Gn 22:1; The Greek historian Nicolaus of Damascus, in the fourth book of his Histories, speaks of Abraham as follows: „Abraham reigned in Damascus, who is said to have come here with a foreign army from the land of the Chaldeans, located above Babylon" (Josephus Flavius 2000, 31).

[9] In Judaism, the patriarch Abraham became a national hero, and apocryphal literature associated extraordinary stories with his name (Book of Jubilees 11,18-22; Pesach 118a; Sanhedrin 108b). For the place and importance of Abraham in Judaism and the New Testament, see Jeremias (1968, 23-6).

[10] See the texts in Jer 31:34; Is 54:13; Sol 3:8-9.

[11] See the following texts: Am 9:10; Jer 9:24; Mic 3:11; Ezk 22:28.

[12] Called by exegetes "Saint Paul's palmares".

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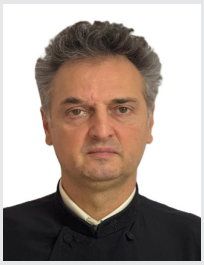
Marriage as a Covenant: The Old and New Testament Insights Within the Wedding at Cana

Abstract

Marriage in the biblical tradition is revealed as a divine institution established from the creation of the world, intended to ensure both the perpetuation of humanity and the communion between man and woman as an icon of God's harmony. The Old Testament presents marriage as a covenantal reality, marked by the tension between the divine ideal of monogamy and the historical distortions brought by sin, yet always oriented toward the Creator's original design. The Song of Songs offers a profound theological vision of conjugal love, in which eros, friendship, and fidelity converge in an exclusive, reciprocal relationship, elevating marital intimacy to the sphere of holiness and freedom. The prophetic writings unfold marriage as the privileged metaphor of God's covenant with Israel, wherein divine fidelity surpasses human infidelity. This symbolism culminates in the Wedding at Cana, where Christ, through the transformation of water into wine, inaugurates the messianic time and raises marriage to the dignity of a sacrament. In this perspective, human marriage becomes an icon of the eternal covenant between Christ and the Church, a space where divine grace transfigures human love into communion with God.



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Introduction

The institution of marriage occupies a fundamental place in biblical anthropology and in the theology of the Old Testament. From the very first pages of Scripture, marriage is presented as a divine institution, instituted by God through the creation of man and woman and through the blessing given to them to multiply and subdue the earth (Gen 1:28; 2:24). It is not constituted as a simple social convention, but as an expression of the will of the Creator, being a call to communion, fruitfulness and mutual responsibility. Although sin introduced deformations in this original order, leading to practices such as polygamy or concubinage, these realities were tolerated only temporarily and never elevated to the level of an ideal. Both Mosaic legislation and the voice of the prophets keep alive the model of monogamy and the indestructible unity between husband and wife, as an expression of God's plan for humanity.

The Song of Songs has a special role in the Old Testament canon, a text that elevates the experience of conjugal love to the rank of a theological paradigm. Beyond the poetic beauty of the dialogue between the bride and groom, the book conveys essential principles regarding marriage: the reciprocity of love, the exclusivity of the relationship, and complete fidelity between the two spouses. In an era when women were often reduced to secondary roles in social life, the Song of Songs highlights the equality between the two partners, their capacity to admire and support each other, and the vocation of love to manifest itself freely and responsibly. Thus, conjugal love is not viewed as a simple biological reality, but as a divine gift and as the foundation of a communion that includes friendship, trust, and spiritual beauty.

On the other hand, the Old Testament develops a theology of marriage that goes beyond the strictly anthropological and social framework, transforming it into a privileged symbol of the relationship between God and the chosen people. The prophets frequently resort to the image of the conjugal covenant to express God's fidelity and, at the same time, the infidelity of the people of Israel. Idolatry is described as "spiritual adultery," and the prophetic call is to return to the first love of restoring the bond of the covenant (Jer 2:2; Hos 2:18-22). In this logic, God is presented as a faithful Bridegroom, full of mercy, who forgives his unfaithful bride and restores her in a new and eternal alliance.

Thus, marriage, in the Old Testament perspective, appears under three complementary dimensions: its ontological foundation, ordained by God at creation; the poetic and anthropological expression of conjugal love in the Song of Songs; and

its symbolic value as a representation of the covenant between God and the people. These coordinates show that the institution of marriage is not a simple social framework for living together, but a reality with profound theological, anthropological, and soteriological implications, which anticipates the perfect communion between Christ and the Church in the logic of the New Testament.

Marriage in the Old Testament. Key elements

In the Old Testament, the fundamental structure of society is constituted by the family, and its foundation is marriage. According to the testimony of Holy Scripture, the family is not an institution founded by human initiative, but a divine institution, ordained by God since the creation of man. In the account of creation, the first people were blessed with the commandment to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and to subdue it (Gen 1:28). Therefore, in the mentality of the Jewish people, the family enjoyed special consideration, being seen metaphorically as the foundation of any social, political, and religious organization.

The foundation of the family is marriage, instituted by God as a covenant and a communion of life between a man and a woman, in both the physical and spiritual planes. Through this act, humanity's vocation to perpetuate humans is fulfilled. From a biblical perspective, marriage is conceived as an indestructible unity between a man and a woman (Gen 2:24). However, sin disrupted this order, altering the divine intention. From the original model of monogamy, people came to practice polygamy. The first biblical example recorded is Lamech, a descendant of Cain, who took two wives, Adah and Shelah (Gen 4:19) (Abrudan and Cornițescu 2002, 114).

Monogamy was generally preserved among those with a modest material situation. Still, in other cultural contexts, such as among the Assyrians and Egyptians, a second wife was tolerated, especially in cases of infertility in the first, leading to forms of concubinage. In the plan of divine economy, God temporarily permitted polygamy to ensure the multiplication of humanity (Gane, 2017). Thus, the family of the patriarch Abraham experiences concubinage due to Sarah's sterility, and the family of Jacob exemplifies the typology of polygamous marriage, a phenomenon that became common in ancient Israel. In the time of Moses, polygamy was so widespread that the Law did not abolish it but only restricted it through normative prescriptions (Abrudan and Cornițescu 2002, 114).

The texts of divine law limit the excesses of polygamy: the prohibition of marrying two sisters (Lev 18:18), the restriction imposed on the king not to take many wives (Dt 17:17), as well as various regulations regarding the protection of slaves or concubines (Ex 21:8–9). Despite these realities, the ideal of monogamy remained in the consciousness of Israel as the institution desired by God, a fact confirmed by the requirement that the high priest marry only a virgin (Lev 21:13–14). Although biblical history shows that monogamy was often violated, it will be restored in its fullness by Jesus Christ, who rejects polygamy (Mt 19:3–9) and raises the union between man and woman to the dignity of a sacrament (Jn 2:1–10).

In the Jewish tradition, marriage did not initially have a strictly liturgical character but was understood in two distinct moments: the engagement (*erusin*) and the marriage itself (*nissuin* or *chatunah*). The engagement was made through a contract between the parents of the future spouses (or, in their absence, close relatives) in the presence of witnesses. Sometimes the act was reinforced by an oath or covenant (Ezk 16:8; Mal 2:14), metaphorically called "God's covenant" because the divine name was invoked. In archaic times, the contract was only verbal, but later it acquired written form, becoming an official document (Tarnavschi 1930, 176).

The engagement involved the payment of a sum of money (the marriage price – mohar), usually fifty shekels, to the bride's family (Dt. 22:29). Cases, this price could be substituted by work (cf. Jas, Gen 29:20–27) or by acts of heroism (Jgs 15:16). Once the engagement was concluded, the young people were already considered bride and groom. However, the girl remained in her parents' house, maintaining the obligation of chastity. In the case of infidelity, the punishment was death by stoning (Dt 22:23–24). The fiancé could break the engagement by a formal act of separation.

The actual marriage took place after a period of waiting. The bride, adorned with a special veil, was blessed by her parents and led in a procession, with songs and dances, to the groom's house. Here, the wedding feast took place, usually lasting seven days (Gen 29:27).

The Old Testament analysis of family and marriage shows that these are not simple social conventions, but institutions with a divine foundation, founded by God since creation. Monogamy, understood as an indestructible unity between man and woman, constitutes the original will of the Creator. However, due to sin and human weaknesses, this order was often altered, polygamy and concubinage becoming tolerated realities in biblical history, but never elevated to the rank of ideal. The prescriptions of the Mosaic

Law attempted to limit excesses and maintain an orientation towards the original plan of monogamy, which remained the exemplary institution, especially for servants close to God.

Marriage in the Song of Songs

The Song of Songs offers a biblical vision of marriage as a mutual relationship of love, appreciation, and support, based on dialogue and freedom. This conception, far from being merely a poetic ideal, constitutes a theological and anthropological principle of the Old Testament that can serve as a model for maintaining and strengthening marriage in the present.

The message of the Song of Songs remains relevant for contemporary society. It can be interpreted as a true "divine manual" on the dynamics of love relationships and the strengthening of the institution of marriage. This biblical book is not limited to poetic expressions of affection but offers fundamental principles that underlie a lasting marriage, valid in any era, including the 21st century.

A first aspect that emerges from the text is that love must be mutual. The poetic dialogue between man and woman is based on sincere affection and each's genuine desire to contribute to the maintenance of the relationship. In this framework, love is not unilateral but mutually shared, with each partner actively and responsibly responding to the other. Thus, marital communion is based on a living exchange of initiatives, complementarity, and mutual giving (Thompson 2021, 9).

Exegetes such as Pope emphasize that the two lovers live in an "alliance" of love, in a free and reciprocal relationship, face-to-face, with initiative constantly alternating (Pope 1997). This perspective emphasizes that the marital relationship in the biblical tradition is based not on dominance or unilateralism, but on an active and dynamic communion, in which the man and the woman describe, invite, admire, and encourage each other.

Significantly, the initiative of the dialogue belongs to the woman, who openly expresses her desire: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine…" (Wis 1:1). This detail contradicts the cultural stereotypes of antiquity and shows that within the framework of biblical marriage there is room for the free manifestation of female passion and desire, equally strong as that of the man (Greenspahn 1984). She directs all her affection and intense longing towards him,

without reservation, which denotes a conception of love as a shared and reciprocal force, not as a simple unilateral possession.

In turn, the man responds with words of tenderness and appreciation, going beyond the woman's perceived imperfections and highlighting her inner and outer beauty. Compliment, in this context, becomes a tool for building and strengthening unity, while criticism would represent an obstacle to harmony. This dimension suggests that, in the biblical conception, marriage is maintained by mutual valuing and the cultivation of appreciation, which nourish the stability and intimacy of the couple.

The exchange of floral metaphors (Wis 2:1-3) highlights another essential aspect of marriage in the Old Testament: marital intimacy is built through modesty and mutual support. The woman humbly describes herself as a "daffodil of the field" or a "lily of the valley," common flowers without brilliance. This self-characterization expresses her sense of simplicity and even insufficiency. But the man elevates her through his words, transfiguring this modesty into a unique and valuable beauty. Thus, the marital dynamic is revealed as a process of mutual edification, in which each partner contributes to the other's valorisation.

Another fundamental principle of marriage, presented in the Song of Songs, is that of the exclusivity of love. Sexual intimacy, in the marital context, is not described as a simple biological experience, but as a sacred, profound, and liberating act, through which the ontological unity of husband and wife is expressed. It does not represent the freedom to escape from marriage, but the freedom to give oneself entirely within it, in a faithful and total communion (Holtz 1984).

The biblical book emphasizes this aspect particularly explicitly in the verses of fragment 7:1–8:4, considered by exegetes to be the most erotic in the entire scriptural canon. Here, the intimacy experienced by a man and a woman as a legitimate couple, who enjoy the fruits of their love, is vividly described: "I am his, my beloved's. He carries my longing for him… Tomorrow let us go to the vineyard and see if it has yielded fruit… there I will give you my caresses" (Wis 7:10, 13). The passionate language is not used outside the conjugal context, but precisely to emphasize the fullness of freedom and joy experienced within the framework of marital exclusivity.

The image of the "locked garden" and the "sealed spring" (Wis 4:12) is a metaphor for virginity and protected intimacy, reserved only for the legitimate spouse. This symbolism suggests the private, sacred, and inviolable character of the marital relationship. The "garden" is a space separated from the world, a place of safety and

communion, to which only the legitimate partner has access. The "sealed spring" evokes the same reality: a total self-giving that cannot be shared but is intended exclusively for the chosen one within the covenant of marriage.

This dimension of exclusivity is reinforced by the well-known expression: "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (Wis 2:16; 6:3), which recalls a marital vow. The formula, also present in the Jewish tradition in the nuptial ritual, expresses a covenant of mutual belonging in which each spouse proclaims their absolute fidelity to the other. It is a declaration of sacred possession, not in the sense of domination, but in the sense of exclusive consecration, through which the man and the woman affirm their indestructible unity.

Thus, we observe that the author of the Song of Songs clearly conveys the fact that sexuality, experienced within the framework of marriage, becomes a divine gift and a space of authentic freedom. It is the deepest expression of the covenant of love, through which the two give themselves entirely to each other, excluding any other intimate bond. As Bullock notes, sexual relations outside of marriage cannot be compared to the total and authentic joy of giving within the framework of the matrimonial alliance (Bullock 1979).

From this perspective, marital exclusivity is not just an ethical norm but a theological and anthropological reality that reflects the divine intention: husband and wife are called to honour each other, to preserve their purity, and to transform the conjugal act into a space of communion, security, and holiness. This Old Testament conception emphasizes that exclusive fidelity is the foundation of a blessed and lasting marriage.

The Book of Songs shows us that love is not reduced to a theoretical or abstract reality but is expressed through concrete facts and a communion of life. The biblical text emphasizes that the relationship between man and woman is based not only on erotic attraction, but also on friendship. The man calls the Shulammite *my beloved*, using a noun in the feminine singular, accompanied by a possessive pronoun (Bokser 1989). Moreover, he calls her "my sister," a title that emphasizes closeness, spiritual union, and respect. In turn, the woman states: "…this is how my beloved is, O daughters of Jerusalem, this is how my bridegroom is" (Wis 5:16), thus emphasizing the integral nature of their relationship.

This language is not accidental: it shows that conjugal love in the Old Testament vision involves not only desire and passion, but also the sharing of dreams, hopes, and

life projects. Along with the erotic dimension, the two also find themselves as traveling partners, as faithful companions in everyday existence. In this sense, biblical love goes beyond mere emotion, requiring active, constant communion, nourished by fidelity and mutual commitment.

Moreau notes that in marriage, we see the daily celebration of the commitment between a man and a woman, and friendship is the essential ingredient that ensures the health and durability of the relationship. This is, in fact, the foundation of biblical love and the necessary condition for marriage to be lasting. In the logic of the Old Testament text, marriage is based on friendship and the common worship of God, both of which are the foundations on which spouses build their intimacy (Moreau 2000).

The broader Old Testament perspective confirms this view. In Gen 2:18, God declares: "It is not good that the man should be alone; let us make him a helper suitable for him," thus placing friendship and mutual support at the centre of the institution of marriage. At the same time, the wisdom literature states that "a friend loves at all times" (Prov 17:17), which reinforces the idea that husband and wife, beyond the erotic role, are called to be life companions, united by loyalty and constant support. In the same vein, the titles "my sister, my bride" (Wis 4:9) show a double dimension: the partner is loved, but she is also a friend, a trusted confidant, part of the same spiritual family.

On this basis, it is evident that marital satisfaction does not derive only from physical attraction, but from the joint efforts to build a solid friendship, which gives meaning and stability to marriage.

Another characteristic element of marriage in the Old Testament, reflected in the Song of Songs, is the emphasis placed on the beauty of the relationship. The man expresses his admiration in words that transcend the external appearance: "Arise, my love, and come!" (Wis 2:10). The beauty of conjugal love is not limited to the physical dimension but includes the inner beauty of character and the spiritual dimension of the relationship, expressed in fidelity to God's plan.

In the book's theological logic, spouses perceive each other as a precious gift from God, and the beauty of their bond deepens with time, like a fine wine that becomes more valuable with age. This conception suggests that conjugal beauty is dynamic: it does not exhaust itself in physical attraction but deepens through spiritual maturation and increasing conformity to the divine will.

In an eschatological sense, the beauty of love presented in the Song of Songs anticipates the communion between Christ and the Church, the supreme model of love.

Therefore, the beauty of marriage does not refer only to aesthetics, but to participation in God's plan, which transforms human love into a sacred and transfigured reality.

The Song of Songs is a collection of love songs, through which the joy of physical love and conjugal intimacy is openly and unreservedly celebrated. Through the words of the two lovers, the biblical text proclaims the value and beauty of mutual devotion between man and woman. Their relationship is depicted as a complete communion, grounded in the total dedication of each to the marital covenant. In this light, the book is not reduced to an erotic poem. Still, it becomes an authentic theological anthropology of love that shows how attraction, desire, and fidelity unite in a unitary reality: marriage.

In practical terms, the Song of Songs has great relevance for any era. When interpreted correctly and used responsibly, it offers principles for strengthening and improving married life, applicable even in the face of the difficulties that spouses face. For us, Orthodox Christians, the book is a call to continue cherishing the institution of marriage as one of society's cornerstones, valuing the goodness and beauty born of the union in the Holy Sacrament of Matrimony.

The Wedding at Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-12)

In numerous artistic representations of the "Wedding at Cana," both in paintings exhibited in museums and in widely circulated reproductions, the evangelical event is not rendered in the authentic appearance of first-century Palestinian society but according to the style and cultural context of each artist's era. This artistic transposition is not without theological value, as it invites the viewer to penetrate, through meditation, contemplation, and reflection, to a deeper level of the scriptural message (Kizito 2021, 6).

A careful analysis of the nature of what the Evangelist John relates, together with the multiple implicit references to the Old Testament, leads us to understand the Wedding at Cana not only as a simple account of a miracle, but as a theological icon of marriage and as an anticipation of the "Messianic Wedding" between Christ and the Church.

In the Jewish context of the era, marriage was conceived primarily as a family contract, negotiated between the two families involved, with the precise terms, resources, and venue established. An essential element of the celebration was wine, a sign of joy, abundance, and blessing. The lack of wine was not only an organizational deficiency but also a public shame brought upon the groom's family, endangering their social status

and honour before the community. The situation was more delicate because hospitality and serving guests were considered an eminently feminine responsibility, which reflects social pressure on the housewife and, implicitly, on the entire family.

In this context, the discreet intervention of the Mother of God acquires a special symbolic value. Through the words addressed to the Savior Jesus Christ in prayer, "They have no more wine" (Jn 2:3), Mary not only signals a material lack, but also expresses a careful compassion for the fragility and vulnerability of a family at the beginning of the conjugal journey. She combines discretion with trust, avoiding public exposure of shame and entrusting everything to her Son. This gesture reflects her role as intercessor and "mother of the helpless," a quality recognized by the Tradition of the Church as a permanent function of the Mother of God.

From a theological perspective, Mary's intervention at Cana highlights the fact that the mystery of marriage opens to a Christological dimension: Christ is called to be present in family communion and to transfigure it through His gift. The transformation of water into wine, the first *sign* of the Gospel of John, becomes an act by which Christ shows that the true joy of marriage cannot be ensured by human resources alone but only through His grace.

The Mother of God also appears in this pericope as a model of expectation and faith: she awaits the fulfilment of God's promises at the Annunciation, and at Cana she awaits the moment when her Son will respond to the discreet call of her heart. This attitude of "active waiting" is a paradigm for spiritual life and for the way in which the Church herself relates to Christ the Bridegroom.

Mary's statement "They have no wine" (Jn 2:3) has generated extensive exegetical debate over time, not so much by itself, but by the response that Jesus offers: "What is that to me and you, woman? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:4) (Moloney 1998). Exegesis has considered this reply to be one of the most challenging statements regarding the Mother of God in all of Scripture, precisely because it apparently expresses a radical distancing between Jesus and His mother in relation to the will of God. Some authors have interpreted the term "woman" as a substitution for the status of "mother," suggesting that Christ would have refused the request (Braun 1953).

However, a careful analysis from the perspective of the Jewish language of the first century shows that the address "woman" did not carry negative connotations. On the contrary, it was a respectful and dignified form of address, used to express a cordial relationship (Ratzinger 2011). Other Gospel passages confirm this fact: the address

to Mary Magdalene at the tomb (Jn 20:15), the dialogue with the adulterous woman (Jn 8:10), with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:21) or with the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:28). The uniqueness lies in the fact that it was scarce for a son to call his mother "woman". Therefore, this linguistic choice of Jesus becomes significant and requires a deeper theological interpretation.

If the words initially seem harsh, the actions that follow show the opposite: Jesus accepts His Mother's intercession but integrates it into a broader plan linked to the salvific "hour" of His manifestation. Moreover, Mary's reaction confirms that she did not perceive the answer as a rejection. With the words "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5), she manifests complete trust in her Son, anticipating the fulfilment of the request. This detail highlights the Mother of God's role as an intercessor and, at the same time, the foundation of the relationship of faith and obedience that must also characterize marriage: trust, openness, and a willingness to follow the will of God.

From a symbolic point of view, the address "woman" places Mary in the broader framework of the history of salvation, in which she appears as the "new Eve". The Gospel of John begins with clear allusions to the beginning of Genesis: the themes of light, life, creation, and darkness overcome are taken up again in the Johannine prologue. Likewise, the placement of the wedding at Cana on the "third day" (Jn 2:1), which symbolically correlates with the "seventh day" of creation, suggests that Christ is inaugurating a new creation here. In this context, Mary, called "woman," is presented as the restored Eve, who, through her mediation, repairs the lack brought about by the first Eve. If in Genesis the woman was associated with lack and the fall (Gen 3), in Cana the woman – Mary – is related to the fullness of grace and life, through reference to Christ (Pitre 2014).

This theological reading links the Wedding at Cana to the Mystery of Marriage: Jesus, the Messianic Bridegroom, intervenes not only to save the honour of a family, but to show that valid marriage is founded on His presence. The transformation of water into wine becomes the sign that conjugal joy and the fruitfulness of family life are not simple human achievements, but gifts that come from the fullness of Christ's grace. Thus, the marriage at Cana is presented as an icon of the restored covenant: the human family is called to participate in the plan of salvation, and Christ himself reveals himself as the foundation and fulfilment of conjugal communion.

When Jesus addresses his mother as "woman," he deliberately identifies her with the woman in the Protoevangelium (Gen 3:15), emphasizing her role as the New Eve, the one through whom the prophecy finds its fulfilment. Thus, Mary becomes the

maternal figure par excellence, the mother whose Son is destined to restore humanity and bring about new life. Her discreet intervention – "They have no more wine" – not only signifies a material lack at the wedding feast level but also an appeal to the Son to manifest His divinity and inaugurate the new Covenant. In the context of a marriage, where wine represented the joy and fruitfulness of the family, Mary's gesture takes on a profound theological dimension: she asks the Son to offer the true wine, a symbol of life-giving grace (Kizito 2021, 8).

Through this address, Jesus not only transcends his biological relationship with Mary but also places the Mother of God in a universal function as the mother of all believers. This aspect is clarified at the cross, where the same title, "woman", is spoken again, constituting a "second good news": "Woman, behold your son" (Jn 19:26). Here, Mary moves from the role of mother of Jesus to that of mother of the Church, represented by the beloved disciple. This evolution shows that the Wedding at Cana anticipates the fulfilment on Golgotha, where the "hour" of the Son will manifest itself perfectly (Vincent, 1997).

Jesus' mention – "My hour has not yet come" – introduces a central theme of the Gospel of John: the "hour" as the moment of complete revelation. In the context of the Wedding at Cana, the "hour" should not be reduced exclusively to the passion and resurrection but should be understood as the beginning of the path of messianic manifestation, the inauguration through "signs" of the divine work. The water turned into wine is an anticipatory sign of the Eucharistic transformation, where the wine becomes the Blood of Christ. Thus, what begins at an earthly wedding fulfils its meaning in the "eschatological wedding" between the heavenly Bridegroom and His Church.

Mary, through her presence and intercession, is called to be a witness to the entire course of the "hour": from Cana to Golgotha. She undergoes an inner transformation, from "here is the handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38) to "be it done to me according to your word," assuming not only biological motherhood but also spiritual motherhood within the new creation. Analogously, marriage means more than a natural union: through the presence of Christ, it becomes an alliance transfigured by grace, a space of fidelity, fruitfulness, and communion in God (Ceroke 2020).

The significance of wine in this context is decisive. In a culture where the lack of wine brought shame to the groom's family and called into question the stability of the new household, Jesus' intervention transforms humiliation into glory, shame into blessing, and human precariousness into divine abundance. Therefore, the Wedding at

Cana becomes a dramatization of the Covenant: human marriage, with all its fragility, is assumed, restored, and raised to the status of a sacrament by the presence of the messianic Bridegroom.

Mary's instruction to the servants – "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5) – remains, in this key, not just a momentary exhortation, but a fundamental rule for any Christian conjugal life: submission to the word of Christ, obedience to His will, and complete trust that He transforms lack into fullness.

The words of the Mother of God addressed to the servants – "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5) – constitute not just a simple pragmatic exhortation, but an actual act of faith and an expression of man's collaboration with the grace of God. Mary's intervention is based on her unique experience as a mother who, even before Jesus's birth, understood the reality of her Son's divinity and preserved it in her heart through an attitude of expectation and obedience. Her previous statement, "They have no wine" (Jn 2:3), is not a simple statement of a material lack, but a delicate presentation of an essential need for the smooth running of a Jewish wedding, where wine was a symbol of joy, communion, and conjugal fruitfulness.

Far from being a simple human appeal, Mary's request has the value of a faith-filled intercession. She does not ask for a natural solution, but anticipates a miraculous intervention, thus highlighting her role as the "New Eve", who presents man's need before God with total trust. Jesus' apparent distancing in the reply "What is that to me and to you, woman?" (Jn 2:4) does not diminish this certainty but rather intensifies it: Mary does not interpret the answer as a refusal but continues with a gesture full of trust – "Do whatever he tells you" –, anticipating the miracle.

In the nuptial logic of the event, this imperative given to the servants has a fundamental symbolic value. Marriage, as a biblical reality, presupposes mutual obedience, willingness to cooperate, and openness to the will of God. These are precisely the features found in Mary's instruction: the servants are invited to enter actively into the dynamics of the miracle, not just to wait passively. They are not told, "He will tell you what to do," but rather, "Do whatever he tells you." This formulation emphasizes the primacy of obedience to the Word, a necessary condition not only for resolving the current situation, but for the transfiguration of the whole of existence.

Thus, Mary not only offers a practical solution to the problem of a lack of wine but also proposes a universal theological principle: the correct attitude of man toward God is unconditional availability to fulfill His will, even when the instructions exceed natural

logic. In the conjugal context, this principle is translated into mutual trust between spouses and an orientation of family life according to the divine will, which confers stability, fruitfulness, and fullness.

In a more profound sense, "Do whatever he tells you" anticipates Christ's Eucharistic command: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:25). The miracle of Cana, where water is turned into wine, prepares the miracle of the Paschal Supper, where wine becomes the blood of the Savior, the guarantee of the new and eternal Covenant. Thus, Mary proves to be not only a witness but also an active participant in the divine plan of salvation, transforming lack into fullness and shame into blessing.

Mary's expression, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5), summarizes the fundamental attitude of the Mother of God: obedient faith, obedient hope, and obedient love. It is precisely these interior dispositions that led God to direct His "love" towards humanity, choosing Mary as the instrument of the Incarnation. In the logic of this obedience, man's correct relationship with the heavenly Father does not consist in anticipatory knowledge of the entire divine plan, but in active trust and obedience to His word. Biblical history confirms this principle: the chosen people had to cross the Jordan before the waters parted (Jo 3:13), and Israel had to trust in the promise of "passing over" into the promised land without seeing the complete fulfilment beforehand (Brown 1970).

In the same way, at Cana, the servants are asked to do only one thing: to do whatever Christ tells them. Filling the stone jars with water – a simple, repetitive, and tiring gesture – highlights the fundamental reality of faith: active waiting, the patience that becomes a channel through which God's power is manifested. The miracle does not occur instantly, but because of this willingness to listen to the end.

Symbolically, the Wedding at Cana is an icon of the restoration of the relationship between God and humanity. If at the fall of Eden Adam and Eve experienced mutual rupture and reproach (Gen 3:13), at Cana, Jesus and Mary restored to humanity the possibility of a new communion. The lack of wine signifies the rupture of the bond between humans and God, the absence of joy and the fullness of life, which marks the existence of fallen man. The intervention of Jesus, mediated by Mary, inaugurates a new time of grace: the union between God and man, prefigured here by a human wedding, opens to the great messianic Wedding between Christ and His Church.

The symbolism of the vessels and the wine also highlight the characteristics of this marriage. The old wine, destined for fleeting pleasure or ritual formalism, is exhausted. It represents the limits of the Law, the letter that cannot give life. In contrast, the new

wine, transformed by Christ from water, is the sign of an inexhaustible joy, of divine mercy. If stone vessels were used for the purification rituals prescribed by the Law, the new wine brought by Christ indicates the overcoming of legalism and the establishment of a new life in holiness. This is the essence of His mission: to change an existence marked by sin into one transfigured by grace.

Mary, by saying "They have no more wine," not only indicates a material lack, but presents to her Son a petition for all humanity. Her gesture conceals at the same time filial trust, anticipated gratitude, and hopeful intercession. She thus opens the way to the Eucharistic banquet, where the wine will be transformed into the blood of Christ, given for the life of the world (cf. Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25) (Lenski 1961).

In the light of this pericope, marriage is presented not only as a social contract but as a privileged space for encountering God. It becomes the setting in which human shortcomings and fragility are assumed and transfigured by the presence of Christ the Bridegroom, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of Mercy. Thus, the Wedding at Cana sacramentally anticipates the reality of Christian marriage: a communion marked by obedience, trust, and active participation in God's salvific plan.

The Evangelist John, introducing the account of the miracle at Cana of Galilee, provides precise details regarding time and place: "on the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee" (Jn 2:1). This chronological and geographical reference, although apparently neutral, is interpreted by exegetes as having a poetic and symbolic value, with profound biblical and theological implications. The image of the wedding, recurring in the Old Testament, is one of the richest in meaning, representing the covenant between God and His chosen people (Ex 34:10-16; Dt 5:2-10; Is 54:4-10; Jer 2:2; Hos 2:4-25).

In the biblical tradition, Yahweh is described as the God of Israel, Creator, Redeemer, Father, and as the Bridegroom of His people. Israel is the beloved, though often unfaithful, bride. Through the prophets, God expresses his steadfast love and fidelity that overcome sin, calling the people to return to their first love (Jer 2:2), to abandon spiritual adultery and idolatry. Thus, the marriage covenant becomes a metaphor for the bond between God and Israel, and divine fidelity is presented as stronger than human sin.

The prophets also announce the coming of the messianic days in the form of an eschatological wedding, when God will renew the broken bond with His people and "engage" them again in eternal love, faithfulness and mercy (Is 54:4-8; 62:5; Hos 2:18,21-22) (Stienstra 1993, 120-2). This eschatological wedding is described as a universal feast,

in which all nations will participate, and Jerusalem will be presented as an adorned bride (Is 62:2-5). In this perspective, the abundance of wine (Am 9:13-14; Is 25:6) becomes a symbol of joy and messianic salvation (Rusconi 2008, 75-85).

In this context, the story of the wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11) takes on major theological importance. Jesus' participation in the wedding (Jn 2:2) indicates the beginning of the messianic time: the presence of the Bridegroom announced by the prophets (La Goia, 2003, p. 216). The miracle of the transformation of water into wine, as the "first sign" (Jn 2:11), marks the beginning of the new and eternal alliance. In Jesus, God's faithful love, revealed throughout the entire history of salvation, reaches its peak. He is the Bridegroom who fulfils and perfects the prophecies, inaugurating the new covenant with His people.

This interpretation is also confirmed by the Apocalypse, where the image of the messianic feast reaches its fullness: "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!" (Rev. 19:9), and the New Jerusalem is presented as the bride adorned for her Bridegroom (Rev. 21:2, 9-10; 22:17). Cana thus becomes a prefiguration of the eschatological wedding between Christ the Bridegroom and the Church the Bride (Perdoli 2007, 192-215).

Therefore, the wedding at Cana is not just an account of a miracle, but a symbolic proclamation of the matrimonial character of the messianic mission. It emphasizes the continuity between the Old and New Testaments: marriage as a covenant, God's faithfulness to His people, and the messianic joy inaugurated by Christ. The event shows that marriage, in the Old Testament and Johannine logic, is the privileged image of the communion between God and humans, transformed into a whole reality by the coming of the divine Bridegroom.

Conclusions

In the Old Testament, marriage does not appear as a social convention but as a divine institution, founded by the Creator at the dawn of creation, intended to ensure not only the continuity of humanity but also the communion between man and woman as a living icon of divine harmony. Even if sin has altered this order, paving the way for polygamy and other imperfect forms of family life, the ideal of monogamy – the indestructible unity between husband and wife – remains the fundamental benchmark that God reveals, and Christ restores it in its fullness.

In this light, the Song of Songs proves to be a proper theology of conjugal love, where eros, friendship, and fidelity intertwine in a complete communion. The poetic language of the book is not a simple aesthetic exercise but a proclamation that conjugal love, lived in exclusivity and mutual dedication, becomes the space of holiness and authentic freedom. The relationship between the bride and groom is depicted not as a power or possession relationship, but as a living exchange of affection, admiration, and support, revealing the divine will for the family: a unity founded on love, fidelity, and mutual respect. Thus, the Song of Songs transcends its era and remains a perennial model for any marriage, reminding us that the true beauty of love lies in its deepening fidelity to God and in the communion between the spouses.

But the supreme meaning of marriage, in the light of Scripture, is revealed when it becomes a metaphor and icon of the covenant between God and His people. From the pages of the prophets, God presents Himself as the Bridegroom of Israel, the One who remains faithful even when His bride proves unfaithful. Divine fidelity, stronger than any sin, announces the new and eternal engagement that will be fulfilled in Christ. This vision reaches its peak in the Wedding at Cana of Galilee, where Christ, by turning water into wine, inaugurates the messianic time and reveals the sacramental character of marriage. Conjugal joy is no longer just the result of human resources but becomes a gift of grace. The lack of wine – a sign of human insufficiency and fragility – is transformed by the presence of the heavenly Bridegroom into the abundance of divine joy.

Thus, marriage reveals its true meaning: not just a social contract, but a mystery in which the communion between husband and wife participates in the communion between Christ and the Church. It becomes the living icon of the eternal covenant, through which God shows his unwavering love for humanity. In this key, the Christian family is not just a unit of social life, but an ecclesial space, a small church, where the grace of God transfigures human love and raises it to the rank of sharing in divine love.

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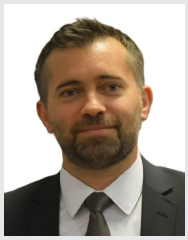
From Weight to Worship: The Multifaceted Meanings of Kavod in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Contexts

Abstract

This study investigates the term *kavod*, translated as "glory", within the Old Testament and its broader implications in ancient Semitic languages. By examining its rich semantic field, the research delineates both the theological and cultural dimensions associated with *kavod*, which signifies not only divine glory but also human honour and social status. In the Old Testament, *kavod* encapsulates the visible manifestations of God's presence, particularly during theophanic events, which are represented by light and fire. The comparative analysis extends to other ancient Semitic languages, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Phoenician, revealing a common linguistic root (kvd) that conveys meanings of weight, importance, and authority. This multifaceted nature emphasizes the dual role of kavod as both a reflection of divine majesty and a measure of human dignity, highlighting the interplay between the sacred and the social. The study also explores specific instances of kavod in biblical narratives, illustrating its connections to concepts of power, reverence, and worship. It discusses how human achievements and status are viewed through the lens of divine glory, with implications for social dynamics in Ancient Israel. Ultimately, this research sheds light on the evolution of kavod as a term that encapsulates complex theological meanings while simultaneously underpinning cultural practices related to honour and authority in the ancient Near Eastern context. By doing so, it enhances our understanding of the spiritual and social fabric of biblical society, demonstrating how concepts of glory intersected with collective identity and divine reverence.



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Introduction

The term *kavod*, commonly translated as "glory", serves as the cornerstone for exploring the multifaceted meanings associated with divine and human honour in both the Old Testament and broader Semitic literature. This study aims to elucidate the complex semantic landscape of *kavod*, revealing its theological weight and cultural significance within ancient Near Eastern contexts. *Kavod* is deeply interwoven with concepts of authority, reverence, and worship. In the Old Testament, it designates not only the glory of God but also the transient glory afforded to humanity. This duality encapsulates how kavod reflects God's impressive manifest presence through phenomena such as light and fire, while simultaneously embodying the honour and esteem attributed to human beings based on their status and actions. By tracing the etymology and usage of the root *kvd* across various ancient Semitic languages, including Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Phoenician, the study reveals a rich tapestry of meanings tied to prominence, authority, and respect.

The study is organized into four key sections. The first section delineates the terminological and semantic meanings of kavod, exploring its theological and profane aspects. The second section examines the representations of divine glory and sacred objects in the Ancient Near East, considering how cultural artifacts signal authority. The third section delves into the cultural implications of glory within the Jewish environment, analysing how social norms reflect divine principles. Finally, the fourth section thoroughly investigates the occurrences of the root *kvd* in the Old Testament, dissecting its verbal, nominal, and adjectival forms to showcase its diverse meanings and significance in relation to divine worship.

In exploring *kavod*'s comprehensive meanings, this study aims to provide insights into the spirituality of ancient Israel, elucidating how notions of glory shaped both individual and collective religious identities and practices. This exploration enhances our understanding of divine and human relationships within the broader context of the ancient Near East, emphasizing the adaptable and evolving nature of language in relation to profound spiritual concepts.

Kavod (glory) – terminological and semantic delimitations. Meanings of the root *kvd*/ *kbt* in the Semitic area – theological and cultural implications

In the Old Testament, the term *kavod*, translated as "glory", designates that which has "weight", "importance", that which is "imposing" and/ or "impressive" (Botterweck

1986, 30). The term is used in both in a theological and a profane sense. On the one hand, *kavod* refers to the glory of God, understood as a visible and impressive manifestation of His presence within creation. Throughout the history of the Old Testament, several theophanic events reveal the invisible God manifesting His holiness and divine power in a visible and perceptible form to man. In the context of those events, the expression "the glory of the Lord" (*kavod YHWH)* is frequently used, which man perceives as light or fire, sometimes of such an overwhelming brightness that it is shrouded in a dark cloud. On the other hand, *kavod* refers to the transient glory of human beings; in such instances, the term is associated with a person's honour, wealth, or importance in their life. The Old Testament also speaks of the fact that man is called to give glory to God, that is, to recognise His presence and His redeeming action in creation and to glorify Him (Wagner 2012, 17).

While a general reading may identify the meanings, it isn't easy to establish how the concept of *kavod* developed. The term's polysemy suggests a complex evolution. In tracing this development and grasping the idea in its full richness, research in comparative Semitic philology offers essential insights. The root *kvd* is not exclusive to Hebrew but appears in other ancient Semitic languages, such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Phoenician. A comparative analysis of the meanings and usages of the *kvd* root in these languages reveals both cultural and semantic similarities and differences, helping clarify the biblical notion of *kavod*. Such an analysis enables a better understanding of how *kavod* came to signify both divine glory and human honour, and of its significance in the spirituality of ancient Israel.

In the Akkadian language, the root *kvd* gives rise to the term *kabattu*(*m*), whose concrete meaning is "liver" – considered, alongside the heart, one of the most vital organs of the body. The term also carries the meaning of "weight" in the physical sense, used for instance to describe the heaviness of an object. From this notion of physical weight, abstract meanings developed, such as "importance", "social position", "temperament", or even "adoration (of divinity)" (Von Soden, 1985, 416; Wagner 2012, 17). The term *kabattu(m)* often appears in ritual contexts, referring to festive meals offered to the gods. This helps explain why, in ancient Israel, *kavod* was used not only to describe the presence and glory of God but also the human act of worship and veneration toward the divine.

The adjectival form *kabtum*, also derived from *kvd*, means "heavy", "massive", or "honourable". Literally, a stone may be called "heavy", while abstractly, a tribute may be

"heavy" (difficult to pay), an illness "heavy" (hard to endure), or a punishment "heavy" (difficult to expiate). Thus, *kabtum* refers both to material weight and to a spiritual or moral burden – something "respectable", "imposing", or even "overwhelming". This dual usage offers a crucial parallel for understanding why *kavod* is used in sacred texts: the manifestation of divine power may be perceived as a spiritual "weight", inspiring reverence and respect (Von Soden 1985, 418).

Another Akkadian derivative from the same root is *kubuttu(m)*, which denotes the "honour" or "esteem" accorded to both deities and humans, thereby emphasising the relational dimension of glory. Similarly, in the Hebrew context, the term *kavod* expresses the manifestation of the divine presence, as well as the relationship established between the person experiencing this presence and God. In the Akkadian language, we also find two adjectives that can help us understand this notion even better: *kabittum* and *kibittum*. Both terms have a military connotation and refer to the idea of authority of the "bearer" of glory. Through these terms, one can deduce the concept that divine glory implies not only the idea of "weight" and "relation", but also that of "authority", thus completing the semantic and theological richness of this notion.

In Ugaritic literature, the root *kvd* illustrates the notion of a solemn "honouring" or "veneration." A clear example of this use can be seen in the myth of the consecration of the god Baal as supreme king. Here, the *kvd* expresses the celestial court's respect and adoration for the newly established divine ruler. This narrative illustrates how the surrounding culture understood the concepts of authority and power, which are primarily attributed to the gods, but also to kings, who often possessed a similar "glory".

In addition to the social and devotional dimensions of the noun, *kvd* also has a special meaning – that of "liver". Beyond its physiological dimension, the liver was considered in many ancient cultures as the seat of emotions and, above all, the source of vitality. This association with the principle of life emphasises the importance and influence of the organ upon the entire person. In this perspective, the concept of glory goes beyond the interpretation of social power, to also refer to the ontological force, the essence, and the inner energy that springs from vitality.

In his study of the root *kvd* in Ugaritic texts, Von Soden interprets it as meaning "to be heavy, to become weighty", highlighting the symbolism of both physical and social weight, as well as the association with divine and royal authority (Von Soden 1985, 416). He sees the root *kvd* primarily as expressing a position of respect and poise, reflecting social and divine hierarchies. In contrast, Tropper adopts a functional approach,

interpreting *kvd* in economic contexts as referring to "increase" or "addition", and thus as a term indicating arithmetic operations. He challenges the notion of "weight" as the principal meaning in textile or economic texts and argues instead that *kvd* designates an action of accumulation or unification. The fundamental difference is that Von Soden sees kvd as a symbol of authority and respect in religious and mythological rites. In contrast, Tropper interprets it as a technical term used for measurements and economic calculations. Thus, the first vision emphasises the symbolic and spiritual value, while the second highlights the pragmatic and numerical use of the root (Wagner 2012, 21-23). These main features individualise the notion of glory in Ugaritic literature (Hoftijzer; Jongeling; Steiner; Porten and Moshavi 1995, 484).

In Northwest Semitic languages, such as Phoenician, *kvd* appears as both a noun and an adjective, with meanings that resonate strongly with those found in Hebrew. Similarly, in Punic, the language spoken by the Carthaginians, *kvd* functions as a masculine and feminine noun, denoting "pomp" and "honour". This Canaanite matrix provided a favourable framework in which the concept of *kavod* developed, influencing perceptions and formulations of prestige, honour, and glory in religious texts and traditions. In particular, the Punic meanings of "pomp" and "honour" likely played a fundamental role in the later development of the meaning of *kavod* in the context of divine glorification, the manifestation of royal prestige, or the expression of personal dignity.

Nevertheless, in the Old Testament, *kvd* acquires unique dimensions, referring specifically to the glory of God, often manifested through epiphanies. This semantic evolution suggests a reinterpretation influenced by the religious and cultural context of Israel. The original meaning of "weight" probably underpins the description of the overwhelming and impressive presence of divine glory, an idea that transcends the merely physical perception of a spiritual reality. Thus, the term *kavod* takes on distinct theological significance. This transformation highlights not only the adaptability of language but also the way in which religious concepts develop profound meanings. That is why the present notion becomes a symbol of the divine presence in the theological and spiritual context of the Old Testament (Wagner 2012, 24-25).

Divine glory and sacred objects in the Ancient Near East

In antiquity, the symbol of spiritual and political leadership was represented artistically by a light, a halo encircling the head, signifying elevated status and divine

power. The connection between mystical radiance and authority appears across various cultures, indicating that the concept of divine power transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. In Ancient Egypt, the pharaohs' crowns symbolised both kingship and the sacred bond between ruler and deity, serving as a visible sign of the sovereign's spiritual and political authority. The pharaoh was perceived as a god on earth; his divine power over the people was bestowed through the crown, granting absolute authority and evoking both reverence and fear among the populace.

The luminous tiara known as *melammu*, worn by Assyrian kings, was not merely decorative but embodied divine power and virtues. The concept of divine radiance is also present in Greek literature, in descriptions of deities – Athena, for instance, is said to bestow upon Achilles an aura of fire to instil fear in his enemies. Similarly, the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (Inanna) is enveloped in an aura of light, inspiring dread and exuding energy and wrath, as described in the Sumerian hymn of Enheduanna.

The presence of God is described similarly in the Holy Scriptures, through dramatic natural phenomena akin to those in the traditions described (Porrino 2016, 22). One of the most common biblical symbols representing divine presence and holiness is fire, most notably the consuming fire on Mount Sinai (Botterweck 1986, 30), which evoked fear among the populace. Other examples include the consecration of the Tabernacle in the wilderness (Lev 9:23) and of Solomon's Temple (2 Chr 7:1), where divine approval is signified through the descent of fire. In contrast, when sacrifices are offered inappropriately, as in the case of Nadab and Abihu (Lv 10:1), the fire consumes them. During the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, God's glory is revealed amidst the light of fire in response to rebellion and doubt, serving as a disciplinary measure and showing that they too can receive punishment (Ex 16:7–10; Nm 14:10, 16:19). This gives rise to the concept of holy fear, a sacred experience that elicits both reverence and fear amongst the people.

In biblical literature, sacred objects – crowns, priestly garments, temples, thrones – were attributed a halo of glory, a term expressed in Hebrew as *kavod*, indicating divine presence. Similarly, in Mesopotamia, crowns, sacred weapons, and temples surrounded by *melammu* highlighted a sacred dimension. This depiction of divine glory and of the splendour that envelops the cosmos appears in both the Bible and in Mesopotamian literature.

The Scriptures speak of the glory of God filling both heaven and earth, revealing that His presence transcends the physical bounds of creation – mirroring messianic

texts that similarly describe the radiance of gods. One also notices that God's entrance into the Temple or the Tabernacle fills the space with glory, transforming it into a sacred sanctuary (Botterweck 1986, 29).

Cultural implications of glory in the Jewish environment

In biblical society, public recognition of high status, reputation, and prestige was manifested through respectful salutations, laudatory speeches, and bowing, while clothing and adornments were key indicators of social rank (Wagner 2012, 7). A pertinent example of *kavod*, expressing dignity and public recognition of spiritual authority, is found in the description of the high priest Eli's seat, which was "clothed in glory" (1 Sm 2:8).

In the Old Testament, glory could be attained through birth into a prestigious family or through official recognition of heroic deeds – military victories or acts of bravery – highlighting an analogy between divine majesty and social honours, even if the latter were often transient (Wagner 2012, 10). The prestige of such individuals persisted beyond death: royal funerals were elaborate events, whereas burials without honour were considered shameful (Dietrich 2009, 436). Nevertheless, human dignity, viewed as a fundamental characteristic of man, is seen as a divine gift deriving from each human being's relationship with God.

From a linguistic standpoint, no significant distinction is made between human and divine glory; God is often depicted as a king clothed in splendour, akin to an earthly ruler, thus establishing a symbolic connection. Beyond this, divine glory is revealed through theophanies – moments that draw God's presence closer to people (Struppe 1988, 132).

The relationship between Kavod and Divinity

In the Old Testament, *kavod* finds its most profound manifestation in relation to God. Divine glory is not only a mere attribute of God but a mode through which the faithful can perceive and experience divine presence. For instance, at the dedication of Solomon's Temple, we find mention that "the glory of the Lord filled the sanctuary" (2 Chr 7:1), reinforcing the idea that God's presence is not only real but overwhelming. This manifestation of *kavod* is often associated with light, fire, or cloud – symbols of God's transcendence and holiness. Notably, the concept of glory is not exclusive to the

God of Israel but constitutes a broader motif within the religious thinking of the entire Semitic region.

Kavod does not pertain solely to divine glory but also encompasses the social dimension of human honour. This is evident in Semitic cultural traditions, where social status, rank, and dignity were frequently symbolised through grandeur and opulence, and these traits were seen as reflections of God's own glory. Hence, individuals of high rank were often perceived as divine representatives, entrusted with the responsibility of reflecting this divine glory through their conduct. Human glory, though finite, remains intrinsically linked to divine glory. This duality is essential for understanding the cultural and religious dynamics of Semitic societies. Biblical wisdom, for instance, highlights that true "glory" does not derive from external achievements but from the fear of the Lord. In his prayer, Solomon also receives divine glory through wisdom without actively seeking it out, inspiring a deeper understanding of both interpersonal and divine relationships.

Contrary to perspectives that emphasise external power and wealth as indicators of success, biblical wisdom brings a profound critique of the idea of material glory. Exemplified by Solomon's writings, the Old Testament affirms that a life grounded in the fear of God is the trustworthy source of human dignity. This view challenges contemporary values, suggesting that worldly honours are empty without a solid spiritual foundation. In this sense, the dual use of *kavod* in both divine and social contexts exemplifies the interaction between the two realms. Divine glory functions as a standard for human behaviour, urging individuals to aspire to a dignity that reflects God's glory. Thus, glory is not merely about elevated status, but about integrating divine values into everyday life.

In religious practice, *kavod* becomes central to worship and ritual. When people glorify God through praise and service, they engage in a synergistic relationship with the divine. This is evident in hymnography and offerings, where worship is not merely symbolic but a means of encountering God and acknowledging His greatness. Theophanies – such as the divine encounters at Mount Sinai or in Solomon's Temple – are instances where God's *kavod* is tangibly manifested, transforming sacred spaces into meeting places between heaven and earth. People are invited to participate in these manifestations actively, strengthening the connection between the individual and the divine.

The relationship between Kavod and Royal/ Sovereign Authority

In Semitic societies, the term *kavod* was frequently used to denote the king's glory and dignity. The king was not perceived merely as a political leader but as a divinity on earth. As such, he held a sacred status, and God's *kavod* was reflected in royal power. In Old Testament texts, the king of Israel is portrayed as God's anointed, entrusted with the mission of leading the people both on earth and in relation to divinity. A prime illustration of this relationship is the depiction of the throne of David or Solomon, shrouded in radiant light that conveyed power and prestige.

The connection between *kavod* and authority is evident in acts of worship and in times of war, where the king's *kavod* inspired loyalty and fervour among his subjects. The king's profound relationship with the divine was demonstrated mainly in moments of crisis, with military victories seen as evidence of the king's glory. This was reinforced through consecration rituals, where the king renewed his covenantal commitment to God and the people. A significant example is the consecration of Solomon's Temple, where "the glory of the Lord filled the house" (2 Chr 7:1), underscoring Solomon's religious as well as political authority and reflecting a symbiosis between the sacred and the profane.

Despite the high regard for royal *kavod*, biblical wisdom discourages idolisation of royal splendour. Proverbs and sapiential teachings maintain that true glory and dignity are rooted not in wealth or earthly power but in the fear of the Lord and in wisdom. This critical perspective reveals a paradox: the more the king demonstrates his dependence on divine authority, the more authentic his *kavod* becomes. Failure to do so causes practical consequences to occur, as in the case of Saul's arrogance and disobedience, which resulted in the diminution of his glory.

Within Semitic society, a close link exists between *kavod*, royal authority, and social structures. All the honours and adornments bestowed upon the king reaffirmed his status and legitimised his actions. Royal prestige was expressed through ostentation and pomp. The legal provisions and social norms of the Old Testament provided a framework for exercising royal authority, emphasising the sovereign's obligations: protecting the vulnerable, upholding justice, and honouring the covenant with YHWH. The king's royal glory thus became a moral and ethical benchmark.

The correlation between *kavod* and the king's authority in the Semitic cultural sphere rests on a complex system of universal links between sanctity, power, and responsibility. *Kavod* serves as a connecting point between the earthly kingdom and

divinity, illustrating that royal glory is more than status – it is virtue and adequate moral behaviour, which reveals a spiritual calling towards elevation to divine standards. This perspective remains relevant today, informing contemporary discussions on power and responsibility in modern societies. Teachings on *kavod* affirm that proper authority is revealed through humility, service, and the acknowledgement of the source of authority in divinity – an example for all leaders who seek a conduct rooted in moral and spiritual values.

Artistic Representations of Glory

In Semitic traditions, the perception of authority was intrinsically linked to the concept of *kavod*, to power and prestige. Art played not merely an aesthetic role, but also served to express cultural, spiritual, and social values. Artistic representations of divine glory promote an idealised vision of the power and legitimacy of earthly rulers, becoming a central motif in the creative works of this cultural region.

The sacred nature and divine presence were often conveyed in Semitic art through visual symbols such as light, radiance, and halos, as seen in depictions of deities in wall paintings and bas-reliefs. These representations sought to convey the holiness and majesty of the divine. In biblical tradition, God's *kavod* was frequently associated with natural phenomena such as light, clouds, and fire – artistically rendered as golden clouds, grey tones, or red flames - creating a sacred atmosphere that evoked deep religious sentiment and powerful spiritual experiences.

Kavod played a key role in portraying Semitic rulers as powerful intermediaries between the divine and their subjects. Sculptures, reliefs, and paintings from palaces and temples depicted kings in majestic light, wearing crowns, sceptres, and regal robes. In Ancient Egypt, pharaohs were often shown with ritual beards or mitres, emphasising the union of royal and priestly functions, and signifying that royal power was a visible expression of divine will. Artistic elements captured religious rituals, in which divine glory was manifest in reverent ceremonies, transforming art into a form of visual theology.

Architectural monuments, such as Solomon's Temple, also symbolised divine glory on earth through their artistic representation. The use of gold and precious wood was emblematic of Semitic prosperity and veneration. The royal palace and temple were focal points of communal life, illustrating the close bond between the people and their deity.

The meaning and occurrences of the root kvd in the Old Testament

To determine the semantic meaning and significance of the root *kvd*, one needs to examine the verbal, adjectival, and nominal forms in which it appears and subject them to analysis. The meanings of the term *kavod* encompass both non-theological and theological senses, related to verbal forms denoting something grand or worthy of honour, as well as adjectival and nominal forms that refer to characteristics such as "imposing" or "honourable". They reflect aspects of social status and honour conferred by the people, which recognise the person's value and contributions to the community.

The theological meanings of the verbal forms of the term *kavod* describe the glorification of God within Israelite worship. In this light, verb forms are used to describe the glorification of God in Israelite worship, while the noun *kavod* refers to the divine glory of YHWH. Ioan Chirilă distinguishes non-theological usages, which pertain to the human realm, and theological usages, which refer to the glory of God. The detailed analysis of the term *kavod* in its various forms enriches our understanding of the connection between human honour and divine glory, providing a solid basis for comprehending the message of the Old Testament (Chirilă 2015, 20).

Verb form of the root kvd

The verb form *kvd* is the basis of the entire semantic family of related Hebrew terms [1]. The *qal* form conveys the meaning "to be heavy," with both positive and negative connotations. Often, the *kvd* root is linked to realities such as war and punishment, denoting oppressive heaviness; other times it is also related to the notion of tribulation: "the burden of slavery" and "the difficulty of service", or to expresses the weight of the soul because of afflictions on a psychological level (Ps 37:4). The root *kvd* also has positive meanings of "honour", "abundance", "wealth" (Jb 14:21; Is 66:5; Ez 27:25) (Gesenius 1905, 522).

In the *hifil* form, *kvd* expresses active causation, as in the Exodus narrative where it describes "the hardening of the heart" (Ex 8:15 and 28:9). This form also denotes the burden of the work imposed by kings, in the historical books (1 Kgs 12:10; 14; 2 Sam 10:10-14; Neh 5:15), bearing a negative sense.

The *pual* and *hitpael* forms amplify and nuance the base meaning. In Prv 13:18, *pual* describes a man honoured for obedience and receptiveness to reproof. In Neh 3:15, we find its antithetical sense, which attracts judgment, because it shows that glory comes either from God or one's fellow men, not from oneself. The examination of the

nuances produced by the verb forms that show the semantic polarity of the root *kvd* – oscillates between the authentic glory that comes from God and the vainglory that is the fruit of self-glorification. Scholarly opinion diverges regarding the interpretation and connotations of *kvd*. Edmond Jacob argues that the root *kvd* primarily expresses the idea of "weight" or "importance", associating objective value with the feeling of respect and honour elicited by that which possesses weight – whether material or symbolic – including divine glory (Jacob 1955, 63). In contrast, some researchers (Kittel 240; Von Ernst and Westermann 2001, 796; Gesenius 1905, 522) believe that *kvd* possesses more diverse, contextual meanings, such as the weight of the soul, pain, or physical or mental burdens, including the burden of slavery or affliction, emphasising negative aspects and suffering. Furthermore, some interpreters consider the root kvd to have moral or religious meanings, such as glory, honour, and esteem, often within ritual or social contexts, not necessarily related to literal "weight" or spiritual respect. Thus, the fundamental difference is that, for Edmond Jacob, kvd implicitly and symbolically signifies a positive understanding of prestige. In contrast, other authors emphasise the term's heterogeneity and diversity of meanings, including negative and material aspects.

Nominal and adjectival form of the root kvd

Apart from the verb forms, we also find numerous nominal and adjectival forms of the *kvd* root in the Old Testament. The verbal forms denote a quality or state, or the weight of an object, simultaneously signifying a burden or significance, or even oppressive events [2]. *Kavod* could also carry the meaning of "numerous" or "rich"; while elsewhere, the noun referred to the "liver" (Von Ernst and Westermann 2001, 794) – the heaviest organ – or even wealth. Therefore, it denotes attributes as well as cultic, social and material realities.

As previously noted, Edmond Jacob argues that the radical *kvd* mainly expresses "weight" or "importance", both physical and moral, and often refers to social status, glory, and divine glory, a concept with double meaning – material and spiritual. On the other hand, Ioan Chirilă distinguishes between a non-theological meaning, where *kvd* indicates a "heavy being" or "honourable", linked to physical and social characteristics, and a theological sense, in which *kvd* designates the glory and glory of God, highlighting the divine aspects (Chirilă 2015, 24). Thus, Edmond Jacob emphasises the symbolic and religious aspect of glory. In contrast, Ioan Chirilă distinguishes between the social and divine meanings, interpreting kvd as both a human attribute and a manifestation of

divine glorification. In conclusion, the former interpretation prioritises the symbolic and morphological aspects, while the second makes a clear distinction between the secular and religious applications of the term.

Thus, the noun *kavod* also signifies a high social standing accompanied by the honour granted due to a person's status or deeds, including honour, renown, dignity, and objects associated with rank, such as garments, royal insignia, etc, which convey a sense of prosperity and exaltation above others. This superiority sometimes places the people thus honoured – such as princes or kings – above everyone else, even in the spatial, visual representation of status.

Associating the concept of kavod with other Hebrew terms

The Hebrew term *kavod* specifies the mode of divine glory's manifestation. We also mention such terms as: *oz* – "power, strength, honour"; *osher* – "wealth"; *panim* – "face"; *chai* – "life"; *yesha/ Yeshua* – "salvation/ Saviour"; *or* – "light"; *anavah* – "humility" and *tehilah* – "prayer" (Chirilă 2015, 24). Their association with *kavod* contributes to a fuller understanding of the concept of divine glory in the Old Testament.

A telling example of the semantic richness of the term is given in chapter thirty-three of the book of Exodus, where Moses expresses the desire to see the glory of God, and the Lord refuses, explaining that seeing His Face is not possible. Here we see the apparent connection between *kavod* and the "face" (*panim*). Theophanies of the Lord are understood as revealing acts of God through which He opens the way for man to know Him, to be in communion, and to communicate with Him.

A crucial semantic nuance arises from the association with the word *yesha*, which means "salvation". "Deliverance" is the most appropriate term to describe the glory of God, particularly in passages that refer to the action through which He saves His people from death due to enemy attacks or famine, as found in Exodus and Numbers, particularly during the journey through the wilderness. When discussing the glorification of God, *kavod* is correlated with *anavah*, meaning "humility, modesty", and *tehilah*, meaning "prayer". The most appropriate association of the term *kavod*, however, is with or – "light", because light most aptly expresses the manifestation of God's glory (Chirilă 2020, 77-78).

Below is the explanation of this term, offered by the renowned Old Testament biblical scholar, Edmond Jacob:

> "The fundamental notion expressed by the radical *kvd* is that of weight/gravity. *Kavod* designates everything that has weight/importance and that is said in relation to wealth (Gn 31:1; Is 10:3; Hg 2:7; Ps 49:17); to success (Gn 45:13; 1 Kgs 3:13) and to beauty (Is 35:2). Just as what is weighty inspires respect and honour, the concept of *kavod* refers not only to an objective reality, but also to the feeling of reverence towards everything that deserves respect. This double meaning is particularly evident in the pedagogical approach God offers humanity in the context of the manifestation of His glory. God reveals His glory and desires that every creature actively participate in this process, bringing Him glory in response, as we see in Ps 29:1; Jo 7:19; Is 42:8; 48:11." (Jacob 1955, 63).

In this way, we learn to recognise and respond to His immense grace, developing ourselves spiritually and morally through divine teachings. This not only enriches our relationship with divinity but also guides us in building an interpersonal community based on respect and honour.Top of the form

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights the multifaceted meanings of kavod as a central theme in both the Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern contexts. By examining the term's semantic richness across various Semitic languages, it becomes evident that kavod serves as a vital link between the divine and human realms. The investigation reveals that kavod encompasses not only the transcendent glory of God manifesting through theophanic events but also the honour and dignity associated with human status and achievements.

By contextualizing kavod within its cultural milieu, the research illustrates how ancient societies perceived the interplay of divine glory and human honour, whereby individuals of high rank reflected divine attributes through their actions and societal roles. Furthermore, the exploration of kavod emphasizes the relational aspect of glory, underscoring the responsibility borne by both divine and human figures to uphold moral and ethical standards.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how notions of glory inform the spiritual and social fabric of biblical society, inviting contemporary readers to reflect on the implications of glory in their own lives. The dual essence of kavod continues to resonate, demonstrating that true honour is intertwined with humility, worship, and an acknowledgment of divine authority. As such, the exploration of kavod

enriches our understanding of the enduring values that shape human interactions with the divine and define spiritual community across cultural contexts.

Notes

[1] Hebrew has seven primary verb forms: *Qal* – the basic form, most common; *Nifal* – reflexive or passive form; *Piel* – intensive (active) form; *Pual* – passive/reflexive form corresponding to Piel; *Hyphilia* – causative form; *Hofal* – passive form corresponding to *Hyphilis*; *Hitpa'el* – reflexive form. Each of these forms expresses specific semantic nuances by altering the basic meaning of the verb in the *Qal*. For example, *Hyphilis* expresses the causal, *Piel* the intensification of action, etc.

[2] Weight should not be understood only in the literal sense, as objective information; *kvd* signifies weight as a burden, weight in its function (Preuss 1995, 168).

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BOOK REVIEWS

Navigating the Landscape of Romanian Old Testament Academic Research

Archd. Olimpiu N. Benea

Ioan Chirilă (coord.), Paula Bud, Stelian Paşca-Tuşa şi Bogdan Şopterean, *Vechiul Testament în cercetările bibliştilor ortodocşi români: ghid bibliografic. Vol. 1: Periodicele şi Anuarele Facultăţilor şi Departamentelor de Teologie din Patriarhia Română / Vol. 2. Bio-bibliografiile profesorilor din Facultăţile şi Departamentele de Teologie din Patriarhia Română şi din străinătate / Vol. 3: Sistematizare tematică* (Cluj-Napoca: Renaşterea, 2025), 160 p. / 264 p. / 357 p.

In the Gospel of Luke (10:25), a *nomikos* – an expert in the Torah – stands up and asks: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers not through a concept or a theory, but through two questions that lie at the foundation of any serious research, whether theological or academic: "What is written?" and "How do you read?" In this light, we also place the three volumes of the *Old Testament in the research of Romanian Orthodox biblical scholars*. They are not just a bibliographical inventory, but a hermeneutical, methodological, and identity infrastructure. They are a contemporary answer to the question "What is written?" and a permanent challenge to the question "How do you read?" *The importance of a bibliographical guide in theological formation*. A bibliographical guide is not a dry list.

It is a map, a memory, and a testimony. The map shows you where the resources are. Memory shows you who contributed to the development of a tradition. Testimony shows that theology is never born in a vacuum, but in a community of reading and working. The three volumes of the guide provide a complete architecture: Volume I: periodicals, yearbooks, theological magazines from across the country – an overview of the places where theology is expressed; Volume II: bio-bibliographies of professors – a panorama of the people and schools that make up the tradition; Volume III: systematization of themes – a theological synthesis of research directions. Together, these are indispensable tools for any student, researcher, or professor of theology.

Volume I – "Where is it written?": the geography of publications. The first volume captures, as the Word-before states, how Old Testament research is found in the country's traditional periodicals. It maps, by decade and by journal, how it was written, what was discussed, where the studies were published, and which themes dominated a particular era. For a student, this is the first step towards professionalization: to understand that theology is not consumed only in courses or textbooks but is born and develops in the living space of magazines, in academic dialogue, in the tensions and openings of a research community. Volume I thus answers the question "where is it read and where is it written?", placing Romanian research in its historical and institutional dynamics.

Volume II – "Who reads?": the schools and teachers of a tradition. If the first volume provides the editorial context, the second volume presents people: Old Testament professors from Romania and the diaspora, with their academic, journalistic, and theological careers. This volume is not just a list of authors, but an intellectual genealogy: it shows the centres of excellence; highlights the continuities between generations; makes visible the relational network between Sibiu, Bucharest, Iași, Cluj, Craiova, Oradea, Arad; places Romania in an international dialogue through professors who teach or have taught in Paris, Boston, Dayton, New York. For students, this is a fundamental volume because it helps everyone understand in which tradition they are, who the teachers are who built this school, and on whose shoulders we sit when we write, teach, or research.

Volume III – "What is written?": themes and directions of Romanian research. The third volume is, as the Foreword says, the "piece de resistance": a thematic systematization of the entire Romanian research on the Old Testament. Here we see the maturity of a theological school: studies on each biblical book; works dedicated to the canon, inspiration, and translations; research in anthropology, messianism, pneumatology, cosmology, and eschatology; patristic landmarks associated with each theme; and biblical archaeology in the Romanian context. Volume III offers not only a bibliography but a theological profile of contemporary biblical Romania. It is the mirror of a school that does not imitate, but produces, does not repeat, but formulates, does not limit itself to translation, but builds interpretation. In this regard, the volume becomes an invitation to responsibility: if you know what was written, you also understand what is missing, what needs to be deepened, what opens as a direction of research for the next generation.

From "What is written?" to "How do you read?" - a hermeneutic program in the light of tradition and experience. At the heart of the dialogue between Jesus and the *nomikos* in Luke 10:25 are two questions that, on the ordinary reading, seem simple, but which the rabbinic tradition – as Strack and Billerbeck show – considers the foundation of all Jewish hermeneutics: "What is written?" (*mah katuv*?) and "How do you read?" (*eikh attah qore*?).

"What is written?" – grounding in the text. In the time of Jesus, any serious discussion between rabbis began with this question: before interpretation, before doubt, before application, the text itself must be established. Strack–Billerbeck shows that this was the first step in halachic disputes: returning to Scripture, to what the Torah precisely says. Through His question, Christ brings the *nomikos* back to the source, to the revealed text, to the foundations of the identity of tradition. For us, in an academic context, the question carries the exact weight: before interpreting, discussing, or constructing theological arguments, we must know what is written in bibliographies, studies, articles, and the exegetical tradition. This is precisely the role of the three volumes of the guide: they present the complete map of what has been written in Romanian Old Testament research up to 2024.

"How do you read?" – hermeneutic discernment. The second question is even deeper. In the Talmudic tradition, Strack–Billerbeck explains the essential distinction between *ketiv* (how it is written) and *qeri* (how it is read). It was not just a question of pronunciation, but of a principle: reading is not mechanical, but interpretive; the text is not just what is on the parchment, but what it becomes in the living tradition of interpretation. By asking "How do you read?", Jesus invites the interlocutor to assume the responsibility of interpretation: from what tradition do you read? on what exegetes do you rely? how do you unite Scripture with life? how do you transform the text into an answer for one's own existence? The Nomikos answers exactly like a mature exegete: he unites the Shema of Deuteronomy with the commandment to love one's neighbour from Leviticus – the rabbinic procedure of harmonizing fundamental texts into a unitary reading. Christ approves of this way of reading but adds, "Do this, and you will live." In other words, accurate interpretation does not remain at the theoretical level, but becomes praxis, life, and incarnation.

Meaning for us: what a bibliographic guide gives us and what it cannot provide us. The three volumes give us the answer to the first question: "What is written?" – a vast, ordered, verified, systematized corpus. But they do not give us the answer to the second

question: "How do you read?" – this remains our responsibility, that of those who open them. Here it is appropriate to present the experience of two decades ago, when I was compiling the first New Testament guide. Back then, the answer to "what is written?" required train journeys, browsing through each magazine, dialogue with librarians, and fragmentary reading of the studies found. Today, technology replaces effort, compresses time, and provides instant access to information.

But what we gain in speed, we risk losing in encounter. Back then, "how do you read?" meant journey, conversation, discovery, respite, the joy of an unexpectedly found text. Today, the risk is the superficialization of reading, the transformation of research into an accumulation of titles with no relationship to their authors. The experience in Regensburg confirmed this truth: it is one thing to have names in a bibliography, and another to meet the person, the mind, the theological breath, the tone, the modesty – in my case, the encounter with Paula Fredriksen, a name that for years I had only read in footnotes. Then I understood that bibliography is not an inert list, but a network of people, traditions, and intellectual lives. And beyond these, there is the Author of Scripture, the One who calls us not only to information, but to transformation.

I return, therefore, to Christ's questions: "What is written?" and "How do you read?" The first level is offered today, in a monumental form, by the three volumes of the bibliographic guide: a complete cartography of Romanian Old Testament research, a professional tool, a solid foundation for future generations. But the second level remains for each of us. "How do you read?" cannot be replaced by speed, algorithms, or digital access. It is an invitation to encounter, to living interpretation, to dialogue with the authors, to the patristic tradition, to our mentors, to our colleagues, to Scripture itself.

A bibliographic guide can tell you what was written. Only you, through effort, through discipline, through the joy of reading, and through the willingness to enter dialogue, will be able to answer: "This is how I read." And beyond all this, if you go far enough along the thread of authors, texts, and interpretations, you will discover what no bibliography can record: The Author who inspires the texts and who gives meaning to our reading.

The Old Testament Unveiled – a Critical Guide to its Texts and Contexts

Mihai Bota

Liviu Galaction Munteanu,
Curs de Vechiul Testament predat la Academia Teologică Ortodoxă din Cluj,
Ediție critică, Ioan Chirilă și Stelian Pașca-Tușa (eds.)
(Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2025), p. 260.

The Introduction to the Old Testament Textbook by the priest, professor, and rector of the Orthodox Theological Academy in Cluj, Liviu Galaction Munteanu, is a reference work for all those interested in understanding the scriptural text. The volume, a critical edition of a theological course under the leadership of an eminent Romanian professor and theologian, captures not only the complexity of the Old Testament but also the author's unique dedication to religious education in Romania. Professor L.G. Munteanu, with a prosperous career and a passion for theology, offers through this work a holistic approach to the sacred texts. Structured into three main parts, the manual integrates both the theoretical and practical aspects of biblical study.

Preliminary notions. In the first part, L.G. Munteanu presents fundamental notions about Holy Scripture. This section provides an informative framework, based on clear definitions of the various terms used in biblical study. From the "naming" and "dividing" of the Bible to the presentation of study methods, the author outlines a complete picture of biblical anthropology, facilitating a correct understanding of the texts.

General part. The general section is dedicated to the history of the Old Testament canon. This part is crucial for biblical study, as it elucidates how the canon was formed, evolved, and received by various religious traditions. The author also brings to the fore the difficulties encountered in establishing the biblical text, offering a detailed discussion of the Hebrew manuscripts, translations, and external influences on the text. Through a rigorous approach, Rev. L.G. Munteanu aims to reveal not only the content but also the cultural and historical connections that influenced the development of Scripture. Each subchapter is well documented and supported by examples from ancient history, which

not only enriches the reading but also brings a practical dimension for theological students who wish to broaden their horizons. Also, the analogies made between the various translations of biblical texts are relevant, emphasizing the interpretative diversity and complexity of the translations.

The special part. In the special section, Rev. L.G. Munteanu focuses on the canonical books of the Old Testament, presenting them in a well-organized structure, dividing them by content. This logical organization facilitates study, allowing the reader to easily navigate between the various types of biblical texts, from historical books to prophetic ones and didactic-poetic writings. The detailed analysis of each book is accompanied by references to the historical and thematic context, which makes the work accessible to both theologians and lay readers. Some critics of the text might argue that the level of detail can be overwhelming for a beginner. However, such in-depth studies are necessary to understand the complexity of a work that has influenced human thought throughout history. In addition, the Rev. professor maintains a balanced, relevant, and provocative tone for all readers.

The impact of the legacy of Rev. Liviu Galaction Munteanu. Without a doubt, the Rev. Professor is a central figure in Romanian theology. His legacy is not limited to this work but extends through the students who had him as a model. The relevance of his works to the present and their contemporary relevance underline his significant impact on Romanian theology. Through his innovative teaching and research methods, he connected the Orthodox tradition with modern developments in biblical studies. One of Muntean's essential contributions is the integration of the historical perspective into biblical analysis. He did not limit himself to presenting the texts from a strictly theological angle but sought to place them in their historical and cultural context. This provides the reader not only with an understanding of the sacred message but also with an appreciation of the developments that influenced its drafting. L.G. Munteanu emphasizes that the Old Testament is not only a religious document but also a product of a complex and dynamic cultural tradition that continues to influence and shape human thought.

His manuscript, reconstructed by his collaborators, allows the emergence of a work with considerable educational and theological impact. It is an admirable undertaking that ensures the continuity and relevance of his teachings, filling a significant gap in Romanian specialized literature. The effort made to integrate and modernize the original content, making it accessible to contemporary readers, is noteworthy.

Criticism and prospects. Although Rev. L.G. Munteanu's work is a valuable contribution to the understanding of the Old Testament, it is also essential for future researchers to address specific areas that can be explored more deeply. For example, the study of intertextuality between the Old Testament and the New Testament could benefit from more attention, given the deep connections between the two parts of Scripture. Thus, young researchers could build on the Rev. Professor's work, exploring these connections and achieving a modern synthesis that reflects current realities. In addition, the interdisciplinary approaches that L.G. Munteanu promoted should be continued and developed; the integration of social sciences, psychology, and philosophy in biblical study has the potential to provide a more nuanced and applied understanding of the sacred texts.

The Rev. Professor's introductory course to the Old Testament is, without a doubt, an essential work for any theology student or anyone interested in deep biblical study. In this critical edition, L.G. Munteanu combines his theological knowledge with a historical and cultural vision, creating an accessible and informative guide. His educational legacy continues to inspire and challenge entire generations of students, making him a reference figure in the Romanian theological tradition. Through this work, Rev. Munteanu not only responds to the contemporary needs of faith but also opens doors to a broader dialogue between science and theology, and in so doing, provides a framework for a better understanding of the role of the Old Testament in human history. Continuing to explore his ideas will ensure the lasting relevance of his works in today's academic and spiritual landscape. This book is not just an introduction, but an invitation to discover the depths of the Old Testament and to better understand our own faith and identity.