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Jacob and the Man at the Ford of Jabbok

A Biblical Subject in the Vine Scroll Frieze of the Church of the Holy Cross of Altʽamar (10th c.)

Michael E. Stone and Edda Vardanyan

1 Introduction

This modest gift of learning is offered to Theo Maarten van Lint on the occasion of his 65th birthday. It has been a joy to prepare this tribute for Theo, a scholar—brilliant and multi-faceted, sensitive and erudite—and a cherished friend. Ad multos annos.

Recent decades have been exciting for those fascinated by the way the biblical heritage, nurtured by Jews, Christians, and Moslems, has grown and developed during past centuries. It is, of course, so foundational that it is inextricably woven into the warp and woof of Jewish and Christian cultures, Eastern and Western, and is expressed in ways obvious and subtle.¹

Here we shall examine how the scene of Jacob’s struggle with the “man” on the banks of the Jabbok stream, was viewed in mediaeval Armenian culture. This event took place before Jacob crossed the river at the ford and took his first steps in the Land of Israel after more than two decades’ absence. He left his uncle Laban’s home in Mesopotamia at God’s bidding, communicated by an angel (Gen 31:13). He brought all his company—his wives, his children and his flocks up to the river. Fearful of Esau’s wrath, he offered a prayer for safety concluding, “I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies” (Gen 32:10). He took steps to forestall Esau’s wrath and, after nightfall, sent his family and flocks over the river (Gen 32:23). Next, Genesis paints the picture of Jacob, alone in the empty camp after all those he loved and all he owned had crossed over.² Then, a “man,”

¹ Throughout his scholarly life, Theo van Lint himself has had a sustained interest in biblical dimensions of Armenian culture as his works, such as those about Ezekiel chap. 1, show. The ways biblical traditions were taken up by Islam are rather different and are the object of growing interest these days.

² It is intriguing that previously, when he was fleeing from Esau to Laban’s house in Mesopo-
later implicitly identified as God/an angel (see Gen 32:20), wrestles with him and only prevails when he wounds Jacob’s thigh.

In this paper, we shall consider in detail the Armenian reading of this incident. It is one chapter in the tale of how that culture expressed biblical tradition and reshaped it. Combining our skills, we wish to explore the interface between two genres, creative biblical retelling and iconography, focusing particularly on features they present that are not explicable from the biblical text. This is done in the context of the study of the band of relief sculptures around the Church of the Holy Cross in Alț’amar (915–921), but its implications are far wider.

Recent decades have seen the publication of the surprisingly numerous Armenian pseudepigrapha known today. Over fifty works in various genres deal just with Adam and Eve; there is a whole volume of compositions about Abraham and similar clusters gathered around other biblical events or figures, such as Noah, the Tower of Babel, Joseph, and Moses. Many writings, perhaps even more than are already known, lie undiscovered and unedited in manuscripts. This vigorous growth of biblical pseudepigrapha is characteristic of mediaeval Armenian creativity and, in extent, is almost without parallel in other Christian cultures.

Of course, these Armenian pseudepigrapha teach us much about antecedent Jewish and Christian traditions that Armenians preserved and transmitted. For the present undertaking, however, this is less relevant than such questions as: How did these pseudepigrapha function for Armenians, clerics and laypeople alike? What was their role in Armenian religious and cultural life? What do they tell us about how mediaeval Armenians read/knew the Bible?

3 The first collection of such texts was Yovsēp’eanc’ 1896; it was translated into English by J. Issaverdens in 1901. Michael Stone has published seven volumes of collected texts over the last forty years, and an eighth one is currently in press: see the Bibliography. Other pseudepigrapha have been published in single volumes and journals. Recently the Armenian apocalyptic literature received serious attention in Bardakjian—La Porta 2014.
Answering such questions may reveal to us why the Armenians wrote so many pseudepigrapha and what their impact was on Armenian culture.\textsuperscript{4}

From a different perspective, we can enquire whether the inclusion of a non-biblical element in a Bible retelling and the inclusion of such an element in the iconography of a biblical scene, both witnesses to the same phenomenon. In both instances there is a canonical description and a non-canonical expansion. \textit{Prima facie}, we assume that both images and texts witness a common understanding of a biblical incident and a shared extra-biblical or para-biblical culture. This article aspires clearly to illustrate this phenomenon in mediaeval Armenian study and retelling of the Bible.

2 The Church of the Holy Cross at Alt’amar and Its Iconography

The Church of the Holy Cross at Alt’amar, erected by King Gagik of Vaspurakan as a palatine church, is an exceptional monument of Armenian art. Its decoration is its most striking feature: bas-reliefs cover the exterior of the church and they are unusually dense and are divided into several registers.\textsuperscript{5}

Recent studies stimulate a reconsideration of the sculptured decoration of the Church of the Holy Cross at Alt’amar. The so-called vine scroll frieze (Figure 19.1) plays an important role in this context and, contrary to preceding interpretations, it features Old Testament personalities in a document of religious art.\textsuperscript{6} Here the hypothesis that this vine scroll frieze represents the image of the elect people, “the House of Israel,” as Isa 5:7 puts it, comes into play.\textsuperscript{7} With Jesus, who calls himself “the true vine” (John 15:1–7), the vine ceases to represent only the people of Israel, and comes to indicate the Kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{8} In Christian art from its beginnings, the motif of the vine is endowed with a profound symbolic meaning.\textsuperscript{9} The vine frieze of Alt’amar fits exactly into the cultural history of this motif. In it, the heroes of the Old Testament are ranged in the order of the history of the people of Israel, from the patriarch Abraham down to the birth of Christ. Each figure in it has its own cycle, composed of a sequence of episodes.

\textsuperscript{4} Some thoughts about these questions are to be found in Stone 2017 and Stone 2019.
\textsuperscript{5} For the description of the sculptured decoration of the Church of the Holy Cross at Alt’amar, see Der Nersessian 1965 and Davies 1991.
\textsuperscript{6} Vardanyan 2014; Vardanyan 2019.
\textsuperscript{7} See Ps 80 (79):9–16; Isa 27:2–3; Jer 2:21; Ezek 19:10–14.
\textsuperscript{8} For the Church Fathers, the allegory of Israel becomes that of the Church, the new “chosen people”: Danielou 1961, 43–48; Murray 2004, 95–130.
The analysis of the cycles of the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac, as well as that of King David, has shown that the biblical episodes represented in the vine frieze are interpreted christologically; they prefigure the coming of Christ, “the true vine” (John 15:1–7) and convey a messianic message. These scenes require a complex interpretation, because their meaning is expressed in the terms of a symbolic, even cryptic, language, drawing at the same time both from Scripture and from apocryphal writings, together with a profound knowledge of the great exegetes of the Bible. The cycle of the patriarch Jacob takes its place among the Old Testament cycles and one scene of the Jacob cycle is the subject of this article.

In the vine frieze, the Jacob cycle is on the south wall of the church, following that of Isaac (Figure 19.1). We are interested in the last scene of this cycle.

According to our hypothesis about the content of this frieze, this scene is to be recognized as Jacob’s struggle described in Gen 32:24–32.\(^\text{10}\) It represents two men fighting face to face. The left-hand figure, which is not bearded, is the “angel” that is wrestling with Jacob. He is in a rather fixed stance and grasps Jacob’s beard with one hand and his ankle with another. Jacob, the figure to

\(^{10}\) Cf. Vardanyan 2017, 117.
the right, is more dynamic, showing movement through his raised right leg and while waving a staff in his left hand. Between them is a dog which, with expressive movement, is biting Jacob’s left leg (Figure 19.2).\footnote{See the description in Der Nersessian 1965, 16; Davies 1991, 61.}

3 Jacob Wrestles with the Man

In night’s darkness “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak” (Gen 32:24). The “man” could not defeat Jacob, so he smote his hough (his popliteal fossa: see below), because of which the Israelites do not eat the hamstring muscle of animals (see Gen 32:25, 32). Here, Genesis introduces two name midrashim: in this portentous context “the man” renames Jacob as “Israel” for “you strove with God and with humans and prevailed” (Gen 32:28).\footnote{This may both refer to Jacob’s vicissitudes in Laban’s house and imply a prediction of his success in his encounter with Esau.}
Jacob names the place where this happened Peniel, for “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Gen 32:30).  

There are unclear points in this narrative:

1. Who was “the man?” Hints make it evident that the “man” was an angel or some other supernatural being: he has to leave at daybreak, he refuses to divulge his name, he blesses Jacob, and he renames him. Conventionally he is called an “angel” though this is not said of him explicitly in the text of Genesis (see Gen 32:24–39).

2. Where was Jacob damaged? The place of injury is designated by Hebrew כרי־ףכ, a term particular to this passage in the Bible (Gen 32:25, 32). In the NRSV it is translated “hip socket” while RSV, following the King James version, gives “thigh” for it in the phrase “thigh was put out of joint”.

3. Why did the “man” wrestle with Jacob? Was it to prevent him from entering the Land? A tension apparently exists between the meaning of Jacob’s new name, Israel, “you have striven with God and with human and have prevailed” and the angel wounding Jacob in the wrestling match on the border of the Land. Yet, it appears that paradoxically, the wounding was not defeat but victory, for Jacob succeeded in crossing the river and Esau received him peaceably.

4. The name change. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, which is said to mean “he has struggled with God and with human and prevailed” (Gen 32:28). The Alt’amar relief portrays the moment of the struggle and the damaging of Jacob’s hough (popliteal fossa) and his hamstring muscles (Gen 32:24–25). The change of a name at divine behest is also recorded

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13 See note 2 above. The danger inherent in seeing God’s face is mentioned elsewhere, see Exod 33:20, 23; cf. Num 14:14; 1Cor 13:2. In Judg 6:22 Gideon says, “I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face”. Quite often “the Lord” and “angel” alternate in the same context. That is the case here.

14 Such a mysterious “man” is also mentioned in Gen 37:15–17. Angels are referred to as “man” in, say, Dan 9:21 “the man Gabriel.” Judg 13:3–6, 10 is another example, where an angel is called “a man” by a human. In Judges the angel’s response to the query about his name is that “it is too wonderful.” In Gen 32:29 the angel diverts Jacob’s attention from the question.

15 Similarly, the JPS translation. Ginzberg 1909, 389 also speaks of the “sinew of the ham which is upon the hollow of the thigh.” Note that this is also the implication of the readings of the Targums and of the Peshitta. The hip joint, the common English language interpretation today, is not even hinted at in these ancient translations.

16 In the onomastic tradition in Armenian, for “Israel” we find: “see-er of God or the mind sees God”, Wutz 1914, 899; “God-see-er” or “enough for God”; Stone 1981, 136–137 has “vanquisher of God” or “see-er of God”. Vanquisher of God surely reflects the biblical name midrash mentioned above in the text.
in connection with Abraham (Gen 17:5) and Sarah (Gen 17:15) where, like here, it is part of a blessing. There are three things relating to names here that highlight their importance: the “man” refuses to tell Jacob his name, the “man” renames Jacob in blessing him, and Jacob commemorates the event by naming the place.

4 The Christological Meaning of Jacob’s Struggle and the Alt’amar Relief

The crucial point of this struggle is the vision of God (“the man”) who blesses Jacob. The episode is determinative since in the course of it, Jacob receives the name Israel, first occurring here in the Bible.

It is important to observe that in the Alt’amar vine frieze, one of the principal themes is theophany. In the Abraham cycle, a central role is played by the three “men” who appeared to Abraham. In the Isaac cycle this theme is illustrated by Isaac’s theophanic vision by the Well of the Oath. So theophany typifies the presentation of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The vision of God is also a central theme in the exegesis of this passage. It is from this same vision that Philo illustrated the virtues of the knowledge of God, virtues which were given by the Creator to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For Jacob the reward of this vision is his new name “Israel,” which means “God-see-er.”

This interpretation is taken up by Christian exegeters. For them Jacob is above all a figure of Christ who overcomes the Adversary and is gifted with the

17 Joshua’s name was changed but it was Moses who changed it (Num 13:16).
18 See above n. 14. We learn from these two passages that such mysterious “men” kept their names secret. In the Animal Apocalypse in 1 Enoch 83–90 animals serve as symbols of humans, while humans signify angels or heavenly beings.
19 This is found quite often in Genesis. Aetiology comes to mind, but that is too simplistic.
21 Vardanyan 2014, 718–723, fig. 7.
vision of the Father. For Justin, the name “Israel” means, “he who overcomes a Power,” for through the Christ-Jacob, he says, the Christians are the “blessed Israel.” This last formulation is exactly the meaning of the vine scroll frieze of the Church of the Holy Cross of Alt’amar.

In early Christian art, the idea that Jacob received a vision of God at Peniel goes back to very early times. One of the oldest examples is the scene on an ivory reliquary of the fourth century from Brescia. On it, in a frieze consecrated to this patriarch, the scene of his struggle (Gen. 32:24–32) is associated with the Ladder of Jacob (Gen. 28:10–19) (Figure 19.3). The vision of God forms the background of two scenes of Jacob’s life which are chronologically distinct. On the Alt’amar relief the similarity of the two figures is notable and it highlights the equality between them—they wear similar tunics and in the struggle their strengths seem to be balanced. Indeed, the “angel” seems to be slightly superior: his feet are firmly anchored to the ground; he holds off his opponent with his hands alone, seizing his heel with one hand and his beard with the other. One might say that the angel does not wrestle, but simply resists Jacob’s action.

Ambiguity about the nature of Jacob’s opponent already exists in the biblical text, where in Gen. 32:25 and 29 he is named successively “man” and “God.” For Jacob, this “man” bears within himself the presence of God: he considers this experience to be a vision of God “face to face” and he names the place “Face

26 According to the theologians, as Jacob, he has overcome the powers, but as Israel, he is the one “who sees God, through his divinity, for only the Son can claim to see the Father”: cf. Origen, Commentary on John, 1, 260 (Blanc 1966, 188–189); Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus, 1, 57, 1–2 (Marrou 1960, 212–213).
27 Justin, Trypho, § 125 (Bobichon 2003, 520–523).
28 On the Alt’amar relief, Jacob is shown brandishing his staff (cf. Gen 32:11). In Christian exegesis, generally the staff is one of the symbols of Christ’s Cross (Reijners 1965, 107–118). Here too, Jacob’s staff plays an important role. Justin speaks of the significance of Jacob’s staff in a chapter totally devoted to scriptural prefigurations of the “wood of the Cross”, cf. Justin, Trypho, § 86, 2 (Bobichon 2003, 420–423). In the case of the Alt’amar relief, the allusion to the Cross is particularly meaningful, for the Church of Alt’amar is devoted to the cult of the Holy Cross.
29 The reliquary is preserved in the Museo di Santa Giulia at San Salvatore in Brescia: see the reproductions in Crippa—Zibawi 1998, pl. 56–60.
30 See the remarks in n. 2 above on the relation of these two scenes. The reliquary is richly decorated on four registers which continue on all its sides. On the right side, the lower frieze is devoted to Jacob. It shows Jacob’s meeting with Rachel by the well and the scenes of the struggle of Jacob combined with Jacob’s Ladder. The Christological interpretation of this reliquary is discussed by Dulaey 2001, 167–168.
31 See the discussion in section 3 above.
of God” or “Visible-form-of God” (Gen 32:31). Like many commentaries, a number of early Christian images follow this interpretation, of which the Brescia reliquary and the scene as given in the Vienna Genesis (6th century) are the

32 In the French translation of the LXX in Harl 1986, 242–244 we read: “Et Jacob donna à ce lieu le nom de Forme-visible-de-Dieu. « Car j'ai vu Dieu face à face et mon âme a été sauvée ».”

33 See, for example, Philo, De mutatione nominum, §14 (Philo, vol. v, 148–151); Philo, De somniis 1, §129 (Philo, vol. v, 366–367); Philo, De praemiis et poenis, §44 (Philo, vol. viii, 336–337).
best examples. At the same time, following Hosea 12:3–5, where the prophet says first that Jacob had striven with God and next that he strove with the angel, the greater part of biblical exegesis identifies Jacob’s adversary as an angel. This interpretation is found widely in mediaeval representations of this scene, where the “man” is a winged angel.

The speculations of the Church Fathers on the nature of Jacob’s adversary are very varied. According to Origen, “the angel” designates the function of one sent. In his view, the angels that are called “men” are to be identified as “angels” because of their mission and not of their nature. In Justin’s view, the one who strove with Jacob is the pre-existent Word, one of whose names is Israel, and “he named the blessed Jacob with it.” For Clement of Alexandria, moreover, the “Face of God” is the Logos. Finally, for others the “Face of God” is Christ (cf. John 14:9, 2 Cor 4:6, and Col 1:15). Armenian authors from the fifth century on also meditated about the identity of Jacob’s adversary. Eliše speaks of him as “Appearance of God” and as “the bodiless become human with a body.”

It is interesting to observe that the vine scroll frieze of Alt’amar contains several scenes with angels. As in our segment representing Jacob’s struggle, all the angels shown in the frieze resemble humans and have no wings. This equivalence is stressed by the angels’ clothing, tunics like those of the human protagonists, and they can be recognized only by their gestures and attributes. In the case of Jacob, the representation of his adversary as it appears in our

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34 Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms. Theol. gr. 31, fol. 12r; Zimmermann 2003, 129–133, fig. 23. It is interesting that in the same manuscript, close to Gen 32:7–8 (fol. 11r), Jacob receives the messengers who are represented as angels. Here, the angels illustrate the word “messenger,” cf. Revel—Dufrenne, 1972, 122–123.

35 Hos 12:3–5: “In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favour; he met him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him. The LORD the God of hosts, the LORD is his name!”


37 It is intriguing to observe that the Hebrew mal’ak “angel” is derived from an old root l’k “to send” and in the Bible, on occasion, the word should be translated “messenger”.

38 Origen, Commentary on John, 11, 144–148 (Blanc 1966, 302–305). Here he refers to Gen 18:2, 19:1; Heb 13:2, concerning Abraham’s guests and Sodom; Josh 5:13–14; he cites Hag 1:13; Mal. 3:1, and Mic 1:2.

39 Justin, Trypho, §125, 5 (Bobichon 2003, 523).


41 See Dulaey 2001, 154–165.


43 Angels figure, for example, in the cycles of Moses, Elijah, etc. The studies dealing with these cycles are under preparation.
relief is more than relevant, for it corresponds fully to the passage of the narrative “a man strove with him.” What can be identified is the set of actions by which he stops Jacob.

5 Pulling the Beard

5.1 Near Eastern Cultural Tradition

In the relief, the angel seizes Jacob’s beard, a detail absent from Genesis but prominent in the image. Its meaning is revealed by copious textual evidence, of which a selection, varying in context and date is given here.

Among the Ancient Near Eastern peoples, a beard was a sign of a handsome, manly and powerful man. In Egyptian and Mesopotamian iconography, kings are always shown with beards. In the description of El, father of Gods and humans, from Ugarit, we read: “(Thou) art great indeed, O El, and wise, Thy beard's gray hair instructs thee.” Correspondingly, to seize or pull someone's beard, to pluck out hairs or to cut it, was not just an indignity—and certainly it was that—but it showed the puller's superiority to the one whose beard was pulled. This changed in Roman Late Antiquity: Greeks, philosophers and religious sages were bearded in the Late Antique world, but the Roman emperors down to Hadrian were represented as clean shaven, as was Alexander the Great.

In the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the beard remained a marker of power and manliness. This was so not only in late antiquity, but is witnessed during the following millennium, and beards returned to imperial portraits from Hadrian's time on.

In Ancient Israel, shaving or cutting off the beard engendered shame. In 2 Sam (4 Reigns) 10:4–5 we read that King David had sent envoys to Hanun the king of the Amorites and Hanun showed his disrespect to them and he “shaved off half the beard of each.” This so shamed them that David said to them, “Remain at Jericho until your beards have grown, and then return.” The same idea of a beard being cut off being a disastrous event recurs in Jeremiah's

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44 Pritchard 1969, 133.
45 2 Sam 10:5. In Leviticus a number of texts forbid shaving off the edges of the beard: see Lev 19:27, 21:5. This was, it seems, a mourning custom, a view strengthened by Isa 15:2 and its image of the king of Assyria as a razor, “the Lord will shave with a razor ... the head and the hair of the feet, and it will take off the beard as well.” The shaving of the feet occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible and is presumably hyperbole in Isaiahs's usage. Similar to Isa 15:2 are Isa 50:6, Jer 41:5, 48:37, Ezek 51, Ezra 93, cf. 1 Esd 8:71 which refers to the plucking out hair from the beard in mourning. Nazirites do not shave or cut their hair, see Num 6:8–19. 1 Cor 11:5–6 shows that the shaving of women’s heads was a sign of disgrace.
prophecy against Moab in Jer 41:5 where he says, “every head is shaved and every beard cut off.” Further instances can be cited, from Isa 15:2 and Deutero-Isa 50:6.

The apocryphal Epistle of Jeremiah 31, satirising Babylonian priests, says, “and in their temples the priests sit with their clothes torn, their heads and beards shaved, and their heads uncovered.” Here the shaven head and cut or pulled beard are signs of lack of self-respect, defeat and of neglect. In the Jewish Greek apocryphon Joseph and Asenath, of which an Armenian version exists, according to 28:14, Asenath is giving instructions to Joseph’s brothers and, “stretched out her right hand and touched Simeon’s beard and kissed him” and forbids him to act. This is an unusual description of touching a beard as a sign of intimacy, yet it also expresses Asenath’s authority, and the instruction that she gave was acceded to by Simeon and Levi.

Later, the Talmud in Treatise b. Shabbat 152a pronounces that the beard is an ornament of the face, while a strange story in b. Baba Batra uses the threat of cutting or pulling the beard to oppose necromancy and relates the following: “There was a certain magician who used to rummage among graves. When he came to the grave of R. Tobi b. Mattenah, (R. Tobi) took hold of his beard. Abaye came and said to him: ‘pray, leave him.’ A year later he (the magician) again came, and he [the dead man] took hold of his beard, and Abaye again came, but he [the dead man] did not leave him till he [Abaye] had to bring scissors and cut off his beard.” Further ancient sources could be adduced. Thus, both the dignity of the beard and the insult implied by pulling, plucking or cutting it off are consistent from antiquity on.

In some contexts, the significance was further reaching, marking victory over an opponent, his humiliation or even his replacement in power.

In a citation supposedly from Ben Sira, though not in any text we have of the book, we read: “A thin-bearded man is very astute; a thick-bearded one is a fool. A different evaluation of touching or holding a beard is to be observed in 2 Sam 20:9, where Joab takes Amasia by the beard and kisses him. Here the taking of the beard apparently indicates intimacy, though the passage is strange in the context of biblical usage and is unique in the Bible.

Compare Ezra 9:3 and also Jer 41:5 and 1 Esd 8:71. Joseph and Asenath was written in the Hellenistic Diaspora (perhaps in Egypt) in the last century BCE or the first centuries CE by a Greek-speaking Jew. In the Armenian version (Burchard 2010, 145) we read: եւձգեացզձեռնիւրԱսենեթեւկալաւզմաւրուացննորա. In Stone (2012), 45, in an Abraham text, the beauty of a grey beard is praised.

In Horowitz and Rozenbaumas’s article of 1994 instances are adduced that show that cutting or damaging a beard is sometimes linked with or reckoned equal to spitting in someone’s face. See also in Aćarean—Manandean 1993, sect. 25, where the suffering of a “new martyr” is described: “certain ones slapped (him) and plucked out (his) beard and spit in (his) face.”
The one who blows in his glass is not thirsty. He who says, ‘With what shall I eat my bread?’ Take his bread from him. The one who parts his beard no one can overcome.”

Josephus (first century CE), *Jewish Antiquities* 2:233–236 relates the infant Moses’s *lèse majesté*—he threw Pharaoh’s crown to the ground. In the same story, as it is told in the Greek *Palæa* (9th century CE), the infant Moses both casts off Pharaoh’s crown and pulls his beard. The same incident occurs in §§ 8–10 of an Armenian apocryphon, *Of Moses and Aaron* but regarding the beard alone, without mention of the crown. Pharaoh is furious and wishes to kill him. The court sages intervene, pointing out that Moses is a baby, and he is put to a test which vindicates him but causes his speech defect. The pulling of the beard means the same as casting off the crown; it is a profoundly insulting claim to the throne; which is why in these stories Pharaoh wishes to execute the infant Moses.

Attitudes to beards in the East are rather strikingly illustrated by two quotations from Western Christian chroniclers. In the thirteenth century CE, Jacques de Vitry in his *Brief History of Jerusalem*, speaks of the Syrian Christians, who, do not shave their beards as do (i.e., not shave) the Saracens, Greeks, and almost all Easterners, but cherish them with great care, and especially glory in them, holding the beard to be a sign of manhood, an honour to the face, and the dignity and glory of man. Like as eunuchs, who are quite beardless, are thought to be contemptible and effeminate by the Latins, so these (the Easterners) think it to be the greatest disgrace not only to have their beards shorn, but to have a single hair pulled out of them.

Much later, in the fifteenth century (ca. 1480–1483), the acute and painstaking diarist, Felix Fabri of Ulm in Germany, on pilgrimage in the Holy Land, remarks:

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50 Cited by Wright 2014, 183–193. The special virtue of a parted or divided beard is witnessed in other sources, some much later than the Talmud: many divided beards of holy men are mentioned in Hetherington 1974.


53 For a detailed discussion of this incident see in Stone, 2021, 144. This text is likely later than the sculpture in Alt’amar, but the tradition is ancient.

54 Another variant of this incident is to be seen in Rabbinic literature.

55 See Jacques de Vitry (II.1., 67–68).
Should any pilgrim form a friendship with any Saracen, he must beware of trusting him too far, for they are treacherous; and he must especially beware of laying his hand on his beard in jest, or touching his turban, even with a light touch and in jest: for this thing is a disgrace among them, and all jests are at once forgotten thereat, and they grow angry. Of this fact, I, Brother Felix Fabri, have had experience.\footnote{Stewart 1905, 252. Observe also the comment of Samuel Rosanelli, cited in Horowitz—Rozenbaumas 1994, 1066–1067: “Les Arabes ne se saisiraient jamais de la barbe d’un entre eux lors une querelle car ils la tiennent pour sacrée et ils prêtent serment par elle. Ainsi en est-il également pour les juifs. Les juifs pieux ne la toucheraient même pas de peur un seul cheveu en tombe au sol et souille la vénérable barbe.” On p. 1067 these authors cite a text saying the same six hundred years earlier. We forego adducing further sources discussed by these authors, for they are much later than the period that interests us. The article is, however, fascinating and illuminates the shared attitudes towards the beard in this broad cultural realm of Jews, Muslims and eastern Christians.}

Let us examine two Armenian examples, relatively close in date to the Alt’amar relief. In Ch. 33 of The Lawcode of Mxit’ar Goš (1184), we can read his statutes concerning “for those who fight and pluck out beards.”\footnote{See Thomson 2000, 147: Chapter 33 “Concerning the Statutes for those who fight and pluck out beards”: “If men come to blows and one happens to be immature yet audaciously plucks out the beard (փետտիցէզմորուս, գաղուց) of the mature one, let the sentence be as follows: to have his hair cut in double amount, and to be beaten as is worthy, especially because he dishonoured the noble. But if the attacker is powerful or noble, let it be half the fine for the [loss of] one faculty.”} Thus a statute in Mxit’ar’s law code, which is later than the Alt’amar sculpture, legislates for the exact situation represented in the relief.\footnote{A similar passage is found in Grigor Tat’ewac’i’s Summer Volume in his exegesis of the prohibition, “Thou shalt not kill” (Exod 20:13). He says that it includes ոչփետելզհերս, կամ մորուս, զիայսպիսիքսմասունքենմարդասպանութեանգործով, “nor to pull out the hair or the beard, for such actions are a part of the act of murder,” Grigor Tat’ewac’i (G.K’, 21). Grigor lived from ca. 1344–1409 and so is notably later than Mxit’ar Goš.} Half a century later, the poet Frik (ca. 1234-ca. 1315), berating himself for his sins of pride and arrogance, says:

Greatly have I twisted a man’s beard,  
The burden came upon me, the slave,  
Greatly have I gloried in my gold.\footnote{Stone—Bourjekian 2001, 47–56.}  

Frik had treated someone pridefully and so pulled his beard.\footnote{For the text of the poem see Tirayr 1952, 239.} In this stanza he is expressing his regret at his high-handed action. In other Armenian sources,
we find the removing of beards or their pulling with the same very negative connotations. Thus, the Alt‘amar relief highlights the angel’s power by having him pull Jacob’s beard. This, of course, stands in some tension with the biblical text in which Jacob’s new name, Israel, is said to mean: “for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (Gen 32:28).

Space does not permit us now to discuss the texts relating to Jacob’s knee in further detail. The incident is strange and raises questions. The Alt‘amar sculptor faced this complex of traditions and chose to represent the moment of the actual struggle. Seizing the beard, somehow damaging the thigh or knee both hint at “you have struggled with God”, the expression taken from the renaming that is the climax of this incident. “Struggling with a human and overcoming” is perhaps a prolepsis of Jacob’s successful meeting with Esau, but overcoming the Divine remains a mystery as is the identification of the “man.” So, the scene encapsulates the exegesis and concretises its meaning.

Looking at the history of scholarship of the biblical apocrypha of the Old and New Testaments since the early twentieth century, it can be seen that the focus has broadened from the close-up study of works from the Second Temple Period and now it also embraces the history of the traditions embodied in those works and connected with their supposed biblical authors. We can discern two tendencies. One is the study the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha first as works in the (usually) Christian manuscripts and traditions that transmitted them, that is to study them first in their later religious and cultural contexts. Only then can their Jewish ancestor writings be considered. This approach is the so-called “New Philology.” The second still infant tendency, of which this article is a partial outcome, is to study the traditions built upon these apocryphal works and the biblical characters giving rise to them in the cultural traditions that transmitted them. The complex Adam apocryphal material as it developed in Armenian, for example, should be studied as part of Armenian religious and cultural tradition. The meeting of such developments with art, expressed through iconography in particular, adds another dimension of this complicated picture. To understand central aspects of mediaeval Armenian culture, it is imperative to investigate these Armenian apocrypha, their form, function,
and social and religious role. What we have said of Armenian, is also true of other national or language traditions as well. This fascinating task is only at its beginning.

5.2 Christological Tradition and Art

In the Christian world the sacral significance of the beard was formulated by certain Fathers of the Church. Clement of Alexandria considered the beard as a sign of power and authority; he equates it with wisdom and experience.\(^63\) Bear in mind that Jacob's struggle is a crucial moment not only for him, but also for the whole Sacra Historia, for when he was named Israel, Jacob took on the role of the father of the elect people, so, it is not surprising that in the Altʽamar scene, Jacob is represented with an impressive beard.

In general, as we have shown above, any violence towards the beard is offensive and humiliating. In a Christian environment, this attitude is reflected in Acts of Philip, an apocryphon of about the 6th century.\(^64\) Pulling the beard is also a warning sign. A passage in the 2nd-century apocryphon, Acts of John, is very telling. In this story, John says that, with James and Peter, he was present at the Transfiguration of Christ upon the mountain. In order to see the event better, John approached Christ, despite having been told to keep his distance. He was frightened by Christ's completely changed appearance, and Christ reproached him for his disobedience: "... and he, turning about, appeared as a small man and caught hold of my beard and pulled it and said to me, 'John, do not be faithless, but believing, and not inquisitive.'" There, where Christ had seized John's beard, he was in pain for thirty days; then John told his master again, and Christ said, "Let it be your concern from now on not to tempt him that cannot be tempted."\(^65\)

In plastic art, pulling someone else's beard is attested from Antiquity\(^66\) and in Christian art, multiple forms\(^67\) of this theme are widespread both in the East and the West.\(^68\) Here we shall examine this act not as an expression of physical

\(^{63}\) Clement of Alexandria, Paedagogus, 111, ch. 111, 18–19 (Mondésert—Matray 1970, 44–47). It is well-known that Clement's writings both show a great knowledge of ancient traditions and also attempt to harmonise them with Christianity.

\(^{64}\) Bovon et al. 1997, 1251.

\(^{65}\) Hennecke 1975, 266.

\(^{66}\) A striking example is on the Ludovisi sarcophagus (250 C.E, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps (Altemps Palace), Rome), which shows the victory of the Romans over the barbarians. Here a Roman soldier is pulling a barbarian's beard.


\(^{68}\) Pulling the beard in art has been the subject of many studies: Jacoby 1987 wrongly thinks that this motif did not exist in antiquity and that in Europe it developed from the ninth
strength, but as a sign of relative position of the two figures, as in the texts cited above. Here are several examples of this theme in art.

On the Basilica of the Forty Martyrs in Saranda (Albania, 5th–6th cc.) there is an early Christian fresco which constitutes one of the first examples of beard-pulling. The fresco is in the crypt and is dated to the early sixth century. In it two men with haloes are pulling each other's beards (Figure 19.4). The figures have been identified recently by scholars as Christ and the Apostle John, while the scene is that described above in the *Acts of John*.

In Cappadocia (in Gülşehir, Karsi kilise), a fresco of the thirteenth century representing hell contains a group: a demon is pulling the beard of three ecclesiastics situated in the lap of Judas Iscariot, the traitor (Figure 19.5). This icon

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71 Judas is represented in profile with a rope around his neck, held by the devil. Judas points to an inscription which quotes mocking words, parodying those of Christ to the Elect (Matt 25:34), addressed to heretical bishops: Jolivet-Lévy 2001, 275, pl. 158, 160.
FIGURE 19.5  A demon is pulling the beard of three ecclesiastics in Hades. Fresco of the Karsi kilise, Gülşehir, Cappadocia (13th c.), detail
FROM: JOLIVET-LÉVY 2001
The iconography is known in Balkan art, where it serves to show the victory of the orthodox bishops over the heretics. It is used most in pictures of the Council of Chalcedon. Examples are to be found in the fourteenth-century fresco of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria) (Figure 19.6) and in the fresco of the Church of the Holy Trinity, in Cozia.

72 Vatican Library, ms. Vat. gr. 1679, fol. 336r.
73 Cf. Walter 2003, 56–58, 62–63, figs. 3–6. According to his martyrology, St Epimachos opposed the pagan judge of Alexandria, who persecuted the Christians. With immovable faith, he continued preaching during his interrogation and ordeal. At the very moment of his death, a miracle takes place and contrary to the judge's expectations, all the pagans convert to Christianity (Acta Sanctorum, Oct. t. xiii, ed. van Hecke et al. 1883, 720–724). Epimachos’s act in this illumination stresses that victory.
74 Walter 1970, 258.
75 The fresco shows the orthodox bishops seated in several rows before Emperor Marcianos.
The motif was widely diffused in mediaeval Western art. The iconography is found on many Romanesque capitals. The capital of the Basilica of the Notre-Dame-du-Port at Clermont-Ferrand (France) shows the punishment of Adam and Eve (Figure 19.7a). Adam grasps Eve by her hair, which act shows that he blames Eve for the loss of paradise and that he wishes to kill her. An angel, who dominates the situation, seizes Adam's beard, showing that he is acting contrary to divine will. Another capital of the same Basilica has the scene of the Appearance of the Angel to Joseph (Matt 1:19) (Figure 19.7b).

The heretics, standing, are grouped at the left. The last bishop in the first row pulls the long beard of the heresiarch. See Filow 1919, 28–30, pl. llii; Walter 1970, 79–80, figs. 37, 117. A. Grabar observes that the occurrence of this iconography of orthodoxy in Bulgaria in the fourteenth century is the result of the growth of heretical sects in that period: Grabar 1928, 279–283. He says that the frescoes of the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul at Tarnovo faithfully preserve motifs of early Hellenistic art, ibid., 271–281. Here too, an orthodox bishop pulls the beard of a heretical one. The church dates from the fourteenth century, but the frescoes were re-painted during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Walter 1970, 97–99. Electronic source: Asociația Focus Oltenia.
angel pulls Joseph's beard, in order to forestall his intention of repudiating Mary when he discovers her pregnancy. The angel's action is the visual expression of the wrong which Joseph is about to perform and it is intended to prevent him from opposing the divine will, as happened in the case of Adam.\footnote{79}

So, in relation to the image on the Altʽamar relief, we can now say that in this image, which we take to represent Jacob's struggle with the “angel,” the beard-pulling indicates Jacob's submission to divine power, which is represented by the angel. This signifies that the situation is dominated by a supreme power, exactly like the word of Christ in the episode of the \textit{Acts of John}: the command “not to tempt him that cannot be tempted.”

6 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{The Wound}

On our Altʽamar relief, a dog is biting Jacob's leg, and that bite makes explicit Jacob's pain resulting from the struggle.

That Jacob received a wound in the struggle is an important point in Gen. 32:25–31.\footnote{80} In Hebrew the site of the wound is הַכְּרָיָן. In the Greek Bible the angel touches τοῦ πλάτους τοῦ μηροῦ αὐτοῦ, “the flat place of his thigh” (Gen 32:26).

6.1 \hspace{1cm} \textbf{Linguistic Approach}

It is worth observing that the Hebrew הַכְּרָי means “thigh” and not “hip”. The word כִּרֵי designates a hollow and is used for the palm of the hand and the sole of the foot. The phrase כִּרֵי הַכְּרָי means then “indentation of the thigh.” The human thigh has an indentation at its posterior side above the knee joint. That indentation is called the popliteal fossa and it is often known as “hough” (Scottish) or “knee pit.”\footnote{81} It is at the lower end of the posterior aspect of the thigh, above the knee joint; everyone is familiar with it, though we can only glimpse our own.

Anatomists describe the fossa as ‘framed’ or created by the insertions of the hamstring muscles, which stretch from the pelvic bones above to the leg bones below; and by the two-headed origin of the gastrocnemius muscle of the lower

\footnote{79}{On the symbolism of the capitals of Notre-Dame-du-Port at Clermont-Ferrand, see Bawschet—Bonne—Dittmar 2012, 229.}
\footnote{80}{Harl 1986, 243, note on Gen 32:26.}
\footnote{81}{Derived from Latin popliteus "knee" and fossa "ditch, trench." \textsc{oed}, s.v. “Hough” gives: “The hollow part behind the knee-joint in humans; the adjacent back part of the thigh. “Knee pit” is an analogy on “armpit,” \textsc{so oed}.}
leg, which stretches down the back of the leg to form the Achilles tendon of the ankle. The hamstrings and gastrocnemius muscle give the back of the leg most of its power; even mild damage to them is disabling, until they heal. Perhaps more importantly, the great nerves and arteries of the thigh and leg lie deep to, and are protected by, these strong muscles, but become superficial—close to the skin—in the popliteal fossa, making them vulnerable to piercing injury. Intriguingly, the Armenian Bible uses the word ամոլաջիլ which means “hamstring” in its translation of the term in Gen 32:26. Many medical sources refer to hollows at the back of the lower limb; the popliteal fossa is the largest of them and ‘contains’ vital arteries and nerves;82 It is rather likely that it is to the popliteal fossa that the Hebrew expression refers. In Gen 32:32 in NRSV we read: “Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.” However, “hip socket” does not closely reflect the Hebrew ךרי־ףכ, for as we have seen, the word ךרי does not mean “hip,” but thigh, and indeed was thus translated in the RSV. In light of the discussion above, we propose that most probably we should translate something like: “... do not eat the hamstring muscle that is on the hough (popliteal fossa) because he struck Jacob in the hough, in the hamstring.” The Armenian version, as noted, translates the term in Gen. 32:25 as “hamstring”.83 The ancient tradition which the Armenian Translators knew, approximated the original meaning of the expression.84 This is reflected in an Armenian apocryphal text which says, “he seized Jacob’s hamstring muscle. He twisted the joint below the knee and lamed him.”85

6.2 Christological Approach
Mediaeval representations often show the wounding of Jacob. On the Brescia sarcophagus, the angel’s action is not very explicit: he holds out his

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82 I (MES) am grateful to Professor Jonathan Stone, Professor of Anatomy in the University of Sydney, who proposed this to me and assisted in the technical aspect of the formulation of this presentation.
83 See NBHL s.v. and Bedrossian 1875–1979 s.v.; NBHL defines it as tendons behind the knee.
84 In the Commentary on Genesis attributed to Step’anos Siwnec’i, it is also called ւննաւնուքին “hamstring.”
85 The text occurs in Stone 2012, 74 (text), 77 (translation). This is our translation in light of the considerations above. The attack was on Jacob’s qhun “thigh” in Elišē’s Commentary on Genesis, Khachikyan et al. 2004, 178–179, the earliest surviving Armenian commentary on Genesis. M. Papazian’s translation of ազդր as “hip” on p. 179 of Khachikyan et al. 2004 is probably influenced by the NRSV, for it also means “thigh.” The thigh is also the interpretation of the Alt’amar relief.
hand towards Jacob’s leg (Figure 19.3). But, usually, following the biblical text, the wound is on Jacob’s ham or thigh.\(^{86}\)

Jacob’s wounding was the object of various speculations in Patristic literature. Some see in it a foreshadowing of Christ’s sufferings in the Passion.\(^{87}\) Others link it to the symbolism of the Cross.\(^{88}\) These approaches again connect Jacob with Christ. In any case, our relief shows the location of the bite by the dog, which is at the knee.

So far, only one text accords directly with this image. This is an apocryphal narrative concerning the patriarchs, The Memorial of the Forefathers.\(^{89}\) According to this text Jacob’s wound is on “the joint below the knee.” Here is this work’s description of the event:

And Jacob, smitten with fear, tried to kill him, lest he kill him. And when it became light, the Lord said to him, “Leave me, for behold, it has become light.” And Jacob said to him, “I will not leave you until you say your name.” And he said to him, “Why do you ask about my name? My name is wondrous. But you will not be called Jacob, but Israel will be your name, for you resisted God. Leave me.” And Jacob did not leave him go until he seized Jacob’s hamstring. He twisted the joint below the knee and lamed him. And then he disappeared from Jacob. And Jacob, coming to his senses, gave glory to God.\(^{90}\)

Although the manuscript is late, it is significant that the text survived in a Vaspurakan manuscript of the fifteenth century.\(^{91}\)

Here we shall discuss several hypotheses which associate the detail in question to the theme of the sacred genealogy.

In the Bible there is a connection between “knee” and “birth”. Some examples are: the maidservant gives birth on barren Rachel’s knees (Gen 30:3); Joseph’s children are brought to Jacob’s knee to receive the blessing (Gen 48:12) and the

\(^{88}\) Dulaey 2001, 156.
\(^{89}\) The text bears the title “Իսոյնատուրյիշատակնախահարցն Աբրահամու Իսահակայ և Յակոբայ.”
\(^{90}\) “... ի Յակոբի փառսրած փառն ի բարգ. փառների այս առաջընթացը Յակոբի սպիտակ փառների փառն եւ երեքայն դիմերս. նրա հաջողությունը փառն. ի այս առաջընթացի հետի Յակոբում, ի Յակոբի փառն ի բարգ այս առաջընթացը փառնում Յակոբի.” Stone 2012, 74 (text), 77 (translation).
\(^{91}\) Yerevan, Matenadaran, ms. (M) 1665 (Miscellany of the year 1445), fols. 173–182v. The manuscript was copied in the village of Tayšoł (Vaspurakan), by Step’annos erêc’ for the priest Karapet.
sons of Makir, son of Manasseh, are born on Joseph’s knee (Gen 50:23). Job 3:11–12 relates an important instance, “Why have I found knees to receive me?” Here the expression reflects the custom of making the new-born child known by putting it on its father’s knees. It is interesting that in Armenian Job 3:11–12, the word γόνατα “knees, lap” is translated either ծունկք “knees”92 or ծնունդք “birth.”93

It is interesting to note that for certain Fathers of the Church Jacob’s wound (on his thigh, as in the biblical text) refers both to the birth and Passion of Christ. According to them, it indicates that Christ, who is going to suffer the Passion, is to be born from the descendants of Jacob. For them, then, the thigh is a euphemism for the sexual organs. Thus, Jacob’s wounding is related to his progeny.94

The possibility cannot be dismissed that the iconography of Ałt’amar is also related to the idea of the sacred genealogy and indicates that Jacob is an ancestor of Christ. This is the more so since this theme plays a significant role in the Old Testament cycles of the vine scroll frieze.95 Finally, the connection of the ideas of “knee” and “birth” is familiar in Armenian iconography. One can cite two examples, though they are distant from Ałt’amar in both time and place. The fourteenth-century bas-relief on a tympanum at the monastery of Noravank’, shows the Virgin and Child in majesty (Figure 19.8). It includes the image of a lion resting its head and part of its body on the left knee of the Virgin. The infant Jesus is presented in such a way that he is sitting partly on his mother’s knee and partly on the lion. Thus, this image, which exalts the incarnation of the Word, highlights that the mother and child have issued from the tribe of Judah (indicated by the lion), thus fulfilling the messianic prophecy (see Gen 49:9). The other example is to be found in the contemporary Bible of Yesayi Nč’ec’i (1318).96 A full-page illumination presents the Tree of Jesse, a symbolic image of the genealogy of Christ, following the prophecy of Isaiah on the birth of the Messiah from the stump of Jesse, father of King David (Isa 11:1–2). In this composition the portrait of David as the ancestor of

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92 Cox 2006, 64: “Կնոջից ապացի փող ձախորդ, ին պորոտի որ դաշնա ապացի.” According to Cox this is the original reading: ibid., p. 280.
94 Dulaey 2001, 158.
96 Yerevan, Matenadaran, ms. (M) 206, fol. 258v. The Bible was copied at Gladzor and illuminated by T’oros Tarōnac’i.
FIGURE 19.8 The Virgin and Child in majesty. Bas-relief on a tympanum on the monastery of Noravank', Armenia (14th c.), detail
© RESEARCH ON ARMENIAN ARCHITECTURE (RAA—ARMENIA)
Christ is inserted into the trunk of the tree, at a joint, a place designated in Armenian by the words ծունկ and մայրան.97

7 The Dog

The preceding studies of the Old Testament cycles of the vine scroll frieze, uncovered the meaning of certain representations of animals included in the scenes. These animals do not represent their species but have a purely symbolic meaning. The Alt’amar vine scroll frieze treats them as code ciphers representing natural or cosmic elements. It has already been stressed that the semantic significance of the animals in the frieze goes far beyond the explanations of the Physiologus or other mediaeval bestiaries, and often draws upon ancient mythological and oriental sources.98

In the scene of Jacob’s struggle, a dog is depicted which is a way of indicating Jacob’s pain from the struggle. Moreover, in the coding of the animal ciphers in the frieze, the dog has a complex meaning. The dog appears more than once, and on each occasion two features characterise it: (1) it accompanies an angel who has appeared to humans; (2) it is always found with an angel in scenes which take place at night, and the night plays an important role in the symbolic meaning of the said scenes.99

The dog has an important place in the mythologies of various civilizations. In many myths and legends, the dog is a companion of the gods and goddesses in their heavenly journeys, their protector and an intermediary between gods and men.100 The dog itself is considered a psychopomp, it guides souls to the kingdom of the dead; it is also guardian of the kingdom of the dead in many mythologies.101

In Armenian mythology too, there was a connection between the dog and the dead. Many sources speak of the aralëz, mythical beings issuing from the god, which descended from heaven to lick the wounds of heroes in order to

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97 Cf. NBHL, 1.1027, s.v. “ծունկն/ծունկի ծնունդ,” NBHL, 2.201, s.v. “Մայրան.”
99 In the frieze the dog also features in the cycles of Moses and John the Baptist. A full study of these cycles is under preparation.
100 Duchaussoy 1972, 135–139.
101 The most famous are Egyptian Anubis, jackal- or dog-headed god of the dead and guide of souls and the Greek Cerberus, the monstrous triple-headed god who guards Hades. However, similar canine-looking beings are found in many other mythologies.
resuscitate them. It is important to note that the legends concerning them were particularly current in the region of Van.

Because of its function as psychopomp, the dog appears on many early Christian funerary monuments. A dog is frequently represented beside the dead, on sarcophagi and in catacombs. In Armenia this cult is expressed on funerary stelae of the early Christian period, many of which bear the image of a cynocephalic saint.

All these designations connected with death and the chthonic world are related to the night. In ancient mythology, the deities of whom a dog is an attribute are connected with the night and the moon. In certain Armenian sources, the word քիշեր (gišer ‘night’) is interpreted as deriving from գէշ (geš ‘death’), as in the Commentary on Genesis by Timotʼēos vardapet (10th–11th cc.).

Thus, the dogs in the frieze of Altʻamar represent a polyvalent image in which the diverse symbolisms related to this animal are combined. In their role as companion, dogs accompany angels and serve as intermediaries between this world and the beyond. Their presence in night-time scenes make them a symbol of the night and of darkness (խաւար), and it is precisely “darkness” that applies equally to night and to death. In the scene of Jacob’s struggle, in addition to the pain Jacob experienced, the dog signals that the combat was at night.

Indeed, in the Bible, the scene takes place at night for “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” (Gen 32:24). Philo gives this night-time a more profound symbolic meaning than simply the time of the day. It is the darkness of Jacob’s previous life, dispersed now under the light of the vision of God:

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102 Their name is associated first and foremost with the legend of Ara Gelecʻik (the Handsome). Movsēs Xorenacʻi, Eznik of Kolb, Pʼawstos Buzand, Sebēos, and Dawit Manyaltʻ (the Invincible) speak of the dog-like legendary beings who revive the dead. The dog is also present in the legend of Sanatrük as an instrument of divine Providence (Movsēs Xorenacʻi, History, 2.36). On the other hand, in the Artavazd legend, dogs gnaw through his chains to free him and his liberation means the end of the world (Movsēs Xorenacʻi, History, 2.61).

103 Sruanjteancʻ 1874, 52–53 (ch. 14).

104 Crippa—Zibawi 1998, pl. 6; DACL III/1 (1913), 1323–1325, s.v. “Chien,” fig. 2795.

105 This relates to the lunar triad, Artemis, Selene and Hecate: Duchaussoy 1972, 135–139.

106 Grigoryan 1912, 60–63, 73, figs. 1–9.

107 Akinean 1952, 15.

108 Compared with the other images of dogs in the frieze, this one looks like a wolf. Perhaps the reason is that only in this scene does the dog attack and do damage. It is interesting that in the Armenian folk traditions, the wolf is one of the evil demons of the night, which idea is echoed in the Book of Laments of Gregory of Narek (69.2), Mahé 1983, 260–262.
For having been in touch with every side of human life and in no half-hearted familiarity with them all, and having shirked no toil or danger if thereby he might descry the truth, a quest well worthy of such love, he found mortal kind set in deep darkness over earth and water and the lower air and ether too. For ether and the whole Heaven wore to his eyes the semblance of night, since the whole realm of sense is without defining bounds, and the indefinite is close akin, even brother, to darkness. In his former years the eyes of his soul had been closed, but by means of continuous striving he began though slowly to open them and to break up and throw off the mist which overshadowed him. For a beam purer than ether and incorporeal suddenly shone upon him and revealed the conceptual world ruled its charioteer. That charioteer, ringed as he was with beams of undiluted light, was beyond his sight or conjecture, for the eye was darkened by the dazzling beams. Yet in spite of the fiery stream which flooded it, his sight held its own in its unutterable longing to behold the vision.109

Christian commentators also insist on the nocturnal character of the struggle. Origen’s formulation is: “If you ask why God, when he talks with him in the nighttime dream does not say to him, ‘Israel, Israel,’ but ‘Jacob, Jacob’, it is doubtless because it was night and he was then only worthy of hearing God’s voice in a dream and not yet directly.”110 Others, including Cyril of Alexandria, compare the morning star with the light of truth.111

8 Conclusion

This analysis has considered the scene of Jacob’s wrestling with the angel and its meaning. The scene is to be understood as part of a broader reading of the vine scroll frieze Old Testament images as imbued with Christian ideas, all leading towards Christ and redemption. There are non-biblical elements in the scene, particularly but not only, the beard-pulling, which are to be understood against the background of Near Eastern culture from antique times and down to the present. An example of combined symbolic and mythological meaning was conveyed by the dog, which symbolises both the pain of Jacob’s wound and

110 Origen, Homilies on Genesis, 15.4 (Doutrelau 1976, 360–361).
111 Dulaey 2001, 165.
also the night-time in which the event took place, as well as the dog's relationship with people. The multiple interpretations of the knee, bitten by the dog, are explored, again bringing to light aspects both of iconography and of textual interpretation.

The more general point of this paper is to show how apocryphal elements in a scene can be understood by having recourse to textual material that exhibits the same elements, and vice versa. This method will enrich the understanding of art historians and also students of para-biblical texts, in order properly to perceive the Armenian biblical understanding which informs both.

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