

# Strive for Peace and Holiness: The Intertextual Journey of the Jacob Traditions from Genesis to Hebrews, via the Prophets

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## Abstract

Interpreters approach the problems generated by the exhortation in Hebrews 12:14–17, that believers should strive for peace and holiness, and avoid the apostasy of Esau, in a variety of ways but with limited success. At issue are: the structural relationship between the pericope and its surrounding passages, the identity of the *μετα παντων* of Hebrews 12:14a, the conceptual links between its clauses, and the literary role of Esau. Given the manner in which the author employs the Old Testament throughout the epistle, the solution to these problems is likely to be derived from identifying the passage's Old Testament background. This article proposes that themes from the Jacob-Esau saga and their interpretations by the prophets echo in the background of the passage. Hebrews, it argues, has interpreted episodes in the exile of Jacob to Mesopotamia and return to Bethel as prefiguring the migration of the people of God to Mount Zion. Believers who apostatise will be following the bad example of Esau. This interpretation has the advantages of fitting the socio-historical context behind Hebrews, accords

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

with the argument of Hebrews 12, and sheds light on the identity of the *μετα παντων*.

## 1. Introduction

Hebrews 12:14–17 (ESV) reads as follows:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birth-right for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

The problems associated with interpreting this passage are well-known. They include, (a) delineating its literary structural relationship with the rest of the chapter, given the abrupt manner in which it begins and ends, (b) identifying who the *μετα παντων* (everyone) in Hebrews 12:14a represented, whether it included the persecutors of the readers, or referred only to fellow Christians, (c) explaining each of the clauses, some of which are quite formulaic and appear disjointed from each other, and (d) clarifying the rhetorical and literary functions of the apparently arbitrary reference to Esau.

In general, three categories of approaches are adopted by interpreters. One category regards the passage as an interlude separating the preceding Hebrews 12:1–13 from the climatic passage describing the 'arrival at Mount Zion' (12:18–29) that follows (e.g. Ellingworth 1993; Lane 1991; Vanhoye 1976; Isaacs 2002; Attridge 1989). While Hebrews certainly employs interludes elsewhere in the letter, this particular approach is less than satisfactory. Apart from leaving the

pericope rather stranded, it also fails to provide an objective basis for resolving the interpretive problems that the passage generates.

A second category of approaches integrates the pericope into the whole of Hebrews 12, but explains the clauses as direct ethical instructions typical of the sometimes staggered ethical instructions at the closing stages of the New Testament letters (e.g. Brown 1982; Bruce 1990; Davies 1967; Moffatt 1924:206; Montefiore 1964). In effect, therefore, this group of approaches suffers from the same problems as the first category. In particular, it does not provide a coherent narrative underlying the ethical instructions. Neither does it help explain the introduction of Esau as exemplar of apostasy.

A third and more recent approach regards the passage as continuing the epistle's pilgrimage or migration to Zion motif (DeSilva 2000:455; Koester 2001:521; O'Brien 2010; Son 2005). So it is argued that the clauses coherently relate to the author's general aim of urging his readers to progress further in their spiritual journey of faithfulness to God on their way to possess the Promise. This has the advantage of fitting in very well with, and continuing the new covenant theme of, the whole epistle. It also helps to explain how the passage merges into the arrival at Mount Zion theme in 12:18–29. However, it does not explain how all the clauses within the passage coherently fit together, nor does it clarify the rhetorical role of Esau.

The fact is, in addition to the explicit reference to Esau, all the clauses in the passage appear to resonate with themes associated with the Jacob-Esau saga in the Old Testament. It is therefore possible that an examination of the saga and its interpretations may help provide further clues for interpreting and resolving the problems generated by the passage. This article is aimed at doing just that.

The argument will proceed in the following manner. Firstly, the literary style of the warning passages in which the author of Hebrews<sup>2</sup> employs the Old Testament in an allusive manner will be summarised and exemplified with Hebrews 6:4–8. Secondly, relevant themes from the Jacob-Esau saga in Genesis will be identified, and their subsequent interpretations by the Old Testament prophets, and the LXX translation, noted. Thirdly, an excursus into the interpretation by relevant literature of Second Temple Judaism will provide a context for the interpretation by Hebrews. Fourthly, echoes of the Jacob-Esau saga in Hebrews 12:14–17 will be identified and described. Finally, the implications of this approach will be enumerated.

## 2. The Old Testament Examples in the Warning Passages of Hebrews

The intriguing technique with which the author of Hebrews employs the Old Testament in his homily has been described variously as similar to Philo's allegorical method (Moffat 1924:xlvi), as typological (Goppelt 1982:176) and as a *Midrash peshet* similar to what pertained in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Kistemaker 1974:174). Johnson (2003:241), who regards the method as unique, describes it as the creation of a 'symbolic world' within which scripture is appropriated as the author's own and applied to solve the pastoral problems of the community.

This technique is particularly evident in the warning passages in which the author employs scripture in an already interpreted allusive manner,

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<sup>2</sup>It is assumed that Hebrews is not a Pauline letter, even though it was written by a man (Heb 11:32) well known to Timothy (Heb 13:23). He wrote from prison to a community of Jewish Christians in the Diaspora, perhaps in Rome. It is also assumed that Koester's (2002:103–123) formulation of the most probable social history of this congregation is correct.

Unless otherwise stated all Bible citations are from the NRSV.

rather than using explicit citations (Mathewson 1999:210; McKnight 1992:21–59). The negative exemplars of the warning passages, which are often explicit, serve the functions of illustrating the author’s point regarding the consequences of apostasy (Gleason 1998:62–91; 2000:281–303). There are a few explicitly stated positive Old Testament exemplars, such as Moses in Hebrews 3, Abraham in Hebrews 6, and the faithful in Hebrews 11, and these illustrate the positive exhortations towards fidelity and faithfulness to God in the wider argument of the letter.

However, in a number of the warning passages, the positive Old Testament examples are presented in an allusive *double entendre* manner. The clauses are couched in such a way that, on one level, they directly address the congregation. Yet, on another level, the same clauses generate a resonating Old Testament narrative background which sheds considerable light on their meanings. The rhetorical strategy behind these *double entendre* positive examples is to lure the reader/hearer into sharing in the life and history of ‘our forefathers’ (Heb 1:1), who, together with the readers/listeners, were being jointly perfected (Heb 11:40). With the readers understanding themselves as sharing in the positive collective memory of the ‘forefathers’, they would be amenable to heed the negative warnings which also applied to the ‘forefathers’.

So, for example, by describing the miracles that occurred at the inauguration of the congregation as ‘signs and wonders’ in Hebrews 2:4, the author, in a *double entendre* manner, parallels their beginnings with the exodus of Israel from Egypt. This is because in the Old Testament, ‘signs and wonders’ was a staple phrase often employed for describing the miracles of the exodus (Exod 3:20, 7:3, 15:11; Deut 4:34, 6:22, 7:19; Ps 135:8–9; cf. Rengstorf 1976:200–261). This allusive

yoking of the readers with the exodus generation enabled the author to in turn apply the warning of severe consequences of failure of faith for the exodus generation to his readers (Heb 2:2–3). The positive Old Testament examples in the warning passages thus not only counterbalance the negative: they also challenge the reader/hearer into taking sides with the positive and so renouncing the negative. Identifying the Old Testament backgrounds of the positive examples of the warning passages is therefore a crucial step in their interpretation.

The warning passage of Hebrews 6:4–8 may appropriately serve to illustrate this rhetorical strategy. After all, it is similar in structure and content to Hebrews 12:14–17, both passages abruptly beginning with arresting terms, namely, ἀδύνατον ('impossible') in Hebrews 6:4 and εἰρήνην ('peace') in Hebrews 12:14. They also have similar literary structures in which a positive subsection (6:4–5 and 12:14) is counterbalanced by a negative subsection (6:6–8 and 12:15–17). In addition, in style, sections of both passages are made up of individual, seemingly disconnected formulaic clauses, each increasing in length and complexity. Then also, the impossibility 'to restore again to repentance' in Hebrews 6:4 is paralleled by Esau's failure to obtain a change of mind despite his tears (Heb 12:17). Accordingly, a brief examination of how the Old Testament is employed in Hebrews 6:4–8 will likely provide a standard for understanding how it also operates in the background of Hebrews 12:14–17.

Scholarly opinions regarding the Old Testament background of Hebrews 6:4–8, however, markedly differ. Ellingworth (1991:42) is, for example, of the view that there is no Old Testament allusion at all in Hebrews 6:4–8. Yet, such an approach does not appear satisfactory, given the manner in which the author constructs the warning passages. Though France (1996:245–276) has argued that Psalm 110 provides an overall narrative background to the passage, his suggestion does not

help to identify the specific allusions behind the clauses. On the other hand, Attridge (1989:169) has proposed that because of the allusions to Deuteronomy 11:11–12 in the covenantal blessings and curses in Hebrews 6:7–8, the migration through the wilderness motif provides this Old Testament background. This approach gives a more satisfactory explanation of the latter part of the passage, but fails to adequately account for the Old Testament allusions in its positive first half.

The most satisfactory proposal considers the influence of themes derived from the wilderness experiences and enumerated in Nehemiah 9. Nehemiah 9 contains ‘the Prayer of the Levites’, and was subsequently utilised in the liturgical prayers of the synagogues (Liebreich 1961:227–237). In the prayer, the faithful recount God’s acts of power and blessings throughout the wilderness years of their ancestors. Some of the clauses that are employed in the prayer echo in the background of Hebrews 6:4–6. So, salvation as spiritual enlightenment in Hebrews 6:4 alludes to the pillar of cloud that guided the wilderness generation (Neh 9:12; cf. 9:19). The statement that God provided his ‘good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold [His] manna from their mouths’ (Neh 9:20; cf. Num 11:25) parallels the tasting of the heavenly gift and the word of God, and the sharing in the Spirit described in Hebrews 6:4–5 (cf. Mathewson 1999:209–225; Oberholtzer 1988:83–97; 1988:185–196; 1988:410–419).

Thus, there is every reason to believe that the positive clauses in Hebrews 6:4–5 are *double entendre* descriptions of the positive experiences of the Hebrews congregation, but using terminologies that also describe the positive experiences of the exodus generation as found in Nehemiah 9. In other words, Hebrews has borrowed the positive language from the Old Testament to depict the contemporary

experiences of the readers/listeners. Since the author's readers were partaking of this immensely positive collective memory of the 'forefathers', they should repudiate the negative examples that follow in the warning.

It is a similar strategy, in which intertextual echoes provide the narrative background to the warning passages, which is adopted in Hebrews 12:14–17. An intertextual echo is an unstated metaleptic use of previously existing scripture or tradition in another text (Hays 1989:29–32). Often, the new text is easily understood without recourse to the background echoes. Occasionally, however, lingering problems persist until the intertextual links are identified. In the case of Hebrews 12:14–17, I hypothesise that the Jacob-Esau saga provides the clues for solving the lingering problems. The literary-theological elements from the Jacob traditions form the background of the positive section of that passage, whereas elements about Esau provide the background of the negative section.

### **3. Themes from the Jacob-Esau Saga and their Interpretations**

By the first century AD, the familiar episodes of the Jacob-Esau saga recorded in Genesis 25:19–35:29 had become a very rich resource for the collective memory of the Jewish people. The Old Testament prophets theologially interpreted the narrative as a typological prefigurement of Israel's migration from Egypt, and polemically applied it to explain the nation's difficult relationship with other nations and with Edom in particular. They have also deployed it in a pastoral manner to reassure exiled Israel of their future return to the Promised Land as a transformed people (Edelman 1995; Hendel 1987; Kaiser 1985:33–46; Krause 2008:475–486).



In addition to this broad outline, the individual episodes of the saga became an important resource in Qumran and Hellenistic Judaism, especially for their liturgical language and exhortations toward piety (cf. Ruiten 2012:595–612). In the New Testament, there are traces of the influence of the saga in John’s gospel (e.g. John 1:51, 4:1–15; cf. Neyrey 1982:586–605; 1979:419–437), the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32; cf. Bailey 2003; 1997:54–72), and Paul’s theology of election (Rom 9–11; cf. Kaminsky 2007). In the present section therefore, I will set out some of the interpretations of direct relevance to our passage.

### 3.1. The key literary-theological themes of the Jacob-Esau Cycle in Genesis

There are several reasons for the considerable influence of the Jacob-Esau narratives on subsequent generations of the faithful. In Genesis, the saga is presented in a self-contained chiasmic structure that emphasises the theme of fulfilment, making it attractive for reflections by its readers (Fokkelmann 1975; Ross 1988:85).<sup>3</sup> In addition, the literary *tôledôt* formula indicates that the cycle aetiologically explains how Jacob became Israel, thus underlying its foundational pedigree (Blenkinsopp 2000:58–59). More importantly, and for our purposes, its episodes reiterate specific theological themes, replicate peculiar literary motifs and create various linguistic puns and plays on words (Kidner 1967:161–187; McKeown 2008:126–161; Speiser 1964:193–276). This no doubt made it attractive for theological reflections by its subsequent expositors. The most relevant of these themes, for our purposes, are, (a) strife, conflict and pursuit, (b) the blessing and favour of God, (c)

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<sup>3</sup>The literary boundaries of the Jacob cycle are disputed by commentators. Whereas some interpreters such as Fishbane (1975:15–38) place the end at Gen 35:22, others such as Wenham (1994:169) and Fokkelmann (1975:85–241) place it at Gen 35:29.

'seeing' God's face, (d) weeping, (e) encounter with angel(s), and (f) defilement.

The pursuit theme is mixed with the strife and conflict themes in Jacob's difficult relationships with Esau (Gen 25:26, 27:41), Laban (Gen 31:21–22, 42) and the Shechemites (Gen 34; cf. 35:5). Both strife and conflict themes are fused together in the momentous wrestling with the angel that occurred at Penuel, and poignantly epitomised by the angel's statement to Jacob: 'you have striven with God and with humans' (Gen 32:28). As it turned out, however, Jacob's subsequent meeting with Esau, like his difficult relationship with Laban, ended with a peace treaty and temporary settlement in Salem<sup>4</sup> (meaning 'peace'), thus providing a sharp contrast within the narrative between the themes of 'striving' and 'peace' (Matthews 1999:97–98).

Similarly the themes of blessings, favour and grace of God feature heavily in the Jacob cycle (Gen 28: 13–15; 30:27; 32: 24–30; 35:9–15). This theme is further paralleled with Jacob 'seeing' Esau's face, generating an interesting irony within the literary-theological movement of the cycle (Gen 32:20). At the wrestling match at Penuel, the theme of blessing received a potent emphasis when Jacob refused to let go until he was blessed by the angel. Once blessed, he encapsulated the episode with the statement, 'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved' (Gen 32:30).

The theme of defilement features in Rachel's theft of her father's teraphims (Gen 31:19; 35:4), and the defilement of Dinah which is described as 'an outrage in Israel' (Gen 34:7), a phrase synonymous with, and subsequently interpreted in the rest of the Old Testament, as a

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<sup>4</sup> Whether Salem is a name of a place (so KJV) or a euphemism for simply stating that Jacob came peacefully or safely to Shechem (so NIV and NRSV) is disputed by interpreters (see Wenham 1994:300).

major spiritual defilement equivalent to apostasy among God's people and deserving of the death penalty (e.g. Deut 22:21; Josh 7:15; Judg 19:23–24; 20:6; 1 Sam 25:25; 2 Sam 13:12).

The theme of 'weeping' also subsequently became relevant for later interpretations of the cycle. It is noted, for example, that Esau cried 'an exceedingly great and bitter cry' (Gen 27:34) for the substitute blessing from Isaac. Jacob also 'wept aloud' upon meeting Rachel for the first time (Gen 29:11), and again when he met Esau near Penuel (Gen 33:4). At the death of Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, the burial site in Bethel was named *Allon-bacuth*, which means, 'the oak of weeping' (Gen 35:8). These themes served as the basic building blocks for the edifices of the theological interpretation of the Jacob cycle by Israel's expositors, a summary of which now follows.

### **3.2. Interpretations of the key themes in the Jacob Cycle by the Old Testament Prophets**

Though Brodie (1981:31–60) has argued that the Genesis account of the Jacob-Esau saga post-dated those of the prophets, it is more likely that the author of Hebrews understood the prophets as interpreting Genesis rather than the other way round. Accordingly, identifying what the prophets made of the Genesis account of the saga will be instructive. The interpretations by Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah are most relevant for our purposes.

#### ***3.2.1. Interpretation of the Jacob traditions in Hosea 12***

Hosea 12 is a typical example of the homilectical interpretation of the Jacob cycle comparable to Hebrews 12:14–17. In order to address a specific pastoral situation in Israel, the prophet directly associates his generation with the patriarch and so draws applicable lessons for

addressing his contemporaries. Even so, there are a number of uncertainties with regard to Hosea's precise interpretive approach to the tradition. Vermes (1970:203–220) and Gertner (1960:274), for example, describe Hosea 12 as a typological *Midrash* on the Genesis account. Good, on the other hand, regards the passage as commenting on five incidents in the Jacob cycle, one of which is not recorded in Genesis (1966:137–151). Holladay alternatively argues that all the references to the Jacob tradition in Hosea are from Genesis (1966:53–64; cf. Ackroyd 1963:259 n.1; Francisco 1963:35; Holt 1995:30–51; Kaiser 1985:33–46).

Notwithstanding these scholarly disagreements, three conclusions may be made from Hosea's interpretation of the Jacob traditions, conclusions that are relevant for interpreting Hebrews 12:14–17. Firstly, the prophet selects seven episodes from the saga and rearranges them in an apparently non-chronological and poetic chiasmic style (Holladay 1966:53–64). These episodes are, namely, (a) Jacob's grasping of his brother's heel at birth (Hos 12:4a; Gen 25:26), (b) his exile to Paddanaram (Hos 12:13a; Gen 28:5), (c) his servitude for two wives (Hos 12:13b; Gen 29:15–30), (d) his wrestling with the angel (Hos 12:4b; Gen 32:23–33), (e) his change of name (Hos 12:4b; Gen 32:28; 35:10), (f) his reconciliation with Esau (Hos 12:5b; Gen 33:4) and (g) his encounter with God at Bethel (Hos 12:5c; Gen 28:13,19; 35:15). This chiasmic rearrangement of the episodes in the Jacob tradition indicates their pastoral homiletic development by the prophet, an approach likely also to have been attractive to the author of Hebrews.

A second and more specific conclusion to be drawn from how Hosea interprets the Jacob tradition is how—in addition to confirming that the wrestling match at Penuel was with an angel (Hos 12:3–4)—Hosea also adds that Jacob *bāḳāh*, 'he wept' as he sought the angel's favour (Hos 12:4). This additional information that Jacob 'wept' before the angel, is

not found in the Genesis account; interpreters disagree on its meaning and implications. Holladay (1966:57) suggests that it refers to the meeting between Jacob and Esau; but, this is unlikely, since Hosea 12:4 describes Jacob's encounter with God. It is possible that Hosea had an additional tradition on Jacob available to him, which he now states (so, Ginsberg 1961:339–347; Good 1966:147), or that he fused Jacob's Penuel encounter with his subsequent experience at Bethel in Genesis 35 (so, Kaiser 1985:33–46; Good 1966:147).

Given the prominence of the theme of 'weeping' in the Jacob-Esau saga as a whole, however, it is more likely that this introduction of the theme into the Penuel account in Hosea 12:3–4 was the prophet's own interpretation of Jacob's importunate plea for blessing from the angel (as in Mal 2:13; cf. Bentzen 1951:58). In that case, in introducing the theme of 'weeping' into the account of the encounter at Penuel, Hosea sharply contrasts Jacob's importunate plea for blessing from the angel (which was duly rewarded with blessings) with Esau's 'exceedingly great and bitter cry' (Gen 27:34) for a substitute blessing from Isaac, (which was refused). This sharp contrast in the two forms of importunity may have been very important for the author of Hebrews as it is replicated in our passage.

Thirdly, in Hosea 12:12–13, the prophet specifically interprets Jacob's bitter experiences with Laban and consequent flight as prefiguring the sojourn and migration of the Israelites from Egypt, that is, as the exodus of 'Israel up from Egypt' (Hos 12:13; cf. Hubbard 2009:222). In other words, Jacob's experiences are interpreted as if the nation of Israel existed within the patriarch at the time. This theological fusion of Jacob's exile with the nation's exile features strongly in the other prophets, and sets the foundation for how the author of Hebrews also employs the migration motif in his homily. Certainly, the author of The

writer of Hebrews, according to whom Levi was in Abraham's bosom when the latter paid tithes to Melchizedek (Heb 7:9–10), would have made a similar typological interpretation of the Jacob narrative.

### *3.2.2. Interpretation of the Jacob traditions in Jeremiah 30–31*

The intertextual relationship between Hosea and Jeremiah is well documented, and indeed, Coote (1971:391) has argued for a correspondence of the wilderness concept in Hosea 12:10 and Jeremiah 2:31. It is therefore not completely surprising that Jeremiah would also adopt a similar interpretation of the Jacob cycle as does Hosea. Indeed, there are extensive parallelisms between Jeremiah 21–31 and Genesis 27–33. As pointed out by Brodie (1981:31), 'the relationship of Jacob with Esau (Gen 27:30–33:20) and of Jacob/Israel with God (Jer 21:1–31:12) both follow a pattern of alienation, northern sojourn, and reconciliation, and contain several other points of resemblance'. Just as Jacob brought his people from exile in Paddanaram to Bethel, God promises through Jeremiah that he would also lead his people back from Babylonian exile (Holladay 1966:17–27).

Of particular relevance to our present concerns is Jeremiah's use of the Jacob traditions to depict the return of Israel from exile in Jeremiah 30–31.<sup>5</sup> In Jeremiah 30:6–12, the prophet implicitly interprets Jacob's march to Bethel as a march to Zion. So, for instance, Jacob's rescue from servitude turns him into the servant of God who ministers to all peoples, a notion later associated with the exodus generation (Jer 30:8–9 cf. Gen 35:9–11; Exod 19:5–6). Wrestling with the angel is also interpreted as *yōlēd*, 'labour pains' from which he is rescued, perhaps with a hint of spiritual transformation or even rebirth (Jer 30:6–7).

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<sup>5</sup> Together, these two chapters made up of a collection of poems of hope expounding exodus theology, are self-contained and act as a separate entity within the whole book. It is commonly labelled as the 'the little Book of Consolation' (Beckling 2004).

Israel, like its ancestor Jacob, will return from exile in peace and ease (Jer 30:10); though in the process, both Jacob and Israel will be disciplined with a hurt that is ‘*ā’nūš*, ‘incurable’ (Jer 30:12 = the limp of Jacob). The exiles are therefore invited to, ‘Come, let us go up to Zion’ (Jer 31: 6, 9, 12), an exhortation which parallels the command to Jacob’s company to ‘go up to Bethel’, the house of God, where a special manifestation of God awaited them (Gen 35:1). This link in Jeremiah, between Bethel and Zion is important, for the Bethel narrative, like Zion’s, was ‘a sanctuary formation narrative’ (Westermann 1980:85). In Hebrews 12:22, the destination of the believer’s migration is also stated as Mount Zion.

Another important development of the interpretation of the Jacob tradition in Jeremiah’s oracle is his poem on the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–34. Worship, joyful celebrations, and the establishment of the new covenant with God’s people mark the return to Zion in Jeremiah. This passage promising the new covenant was of major importance to the author of Hebrews, who quotes it in full in Hebrews 8:8–12. This new covenant interpretation of the tradition also serves as the background of the description in Hebrews 12:22 of the coming of the people of God to Mount Zion, ‘the city of the living God’, to worship in the presence of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant.

### *3.2.3. Interpretation of the Jacob Traditions in Isaiah 34–35*

Kratz has stressed the pivotal role of the name Jacob/Israel in the book of Isaiah where it serves as ‘a *leitmotif* with which we can understand the development of both Isaianic prophecy and the various stages in the composition of the book’ (2006:104–105). Indeed, the interchanging of both names as designations for the patriarch and for his descendants in Isaiah is so frequent that, in certain passages, the primary referent is unclear. In so doing, Isaiah introduces elements from the patriarchal

narratives in an allusive manner to intermingle with typological references to the exodus motifs. As in Hosea, and Hebrews, the experiences of Isaiah's contemporaries are yoked with the Jacob traditions.

The oracle of Isaiah 34–35, which like Jeremiah 30–31 is self-contained, is relevant for understanding the prophetic interpretation of the Jacob-Esau saga. Isaiah 34 pronounces judgment on the nations and singles out Edom for special indictment (cf. Matthews 1995:118). This is coupled with Isaiah 35, which on the other hand promises the faithful a new wilderness exodus through which they will see God's glory (Isa 35:2). In the wilderness, a holy highway will be opened for the faithful to return to Zion (Isa 35:10; cf. Kratz 2006:107). The wilderness will be transformed into a garden of joy and celebration. Isaiah therefore exhorts the returnees to, 'Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees' (Isa 35:3; cf. Oswalt 1991:162). Contrasted with the judgment pronounced on Edom in Isaiah 34, this description of peace, joy, and holiness as pilgrims walk in the 'Holy Way', reflects the sharp juxtaposition of the Jacob and Esau traditions that occurs in Genesis.<sup>6</sup> As we shall shortly see, several citations from Isaiah 35 play pivotal roles in Hebrews 12:1–13 to serve to anticipate the allusions to the Jacob-Esau saga in Hebrews 12:14–17.

#### *3.2.4. Summary of interpretations of the Jacob traditions by the Prophets*

In summary, the Old Testament prophets interpreted the Jacob-Esau saga in directions which serve as solid foundation for the interpretation by Hebrews. Hosea summarised the episodes in discrete lessons and

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<sup>6</sup>For more on the contrasting themes in Isaiah 34–35 see Miscall (1999). For the use of the Jacob traditions in other parts of Isaiah, see Watts (2004:481–508) and for further exploration of Jacob-Esau relationship in Ezekiel, see Woudstra (1968:21–35).



applied them in allusive manner to his contemporaries. Of particular interest is the sharp implicit contrast Hosea makes between Jacob's importunate plea for God's favour and Esau's equally importunate but rejected plea. Jeremiah develops the theme of the migration of Jacob to Bethel for a special encounter with God into a new covenant exodus-migration of God's people to Zion to worship God. Isaiah draws parallels from the contrast between Esau and Jacob in Genesis with the contrast of judgment on Edom with blessings on those who walk in the 'Holy Way' of the new covenant to Mount Zion. All these are mirrored in the use of the tradition by Hebrews.

### **3.3. The Jacob traditions in Genesis LXX**

Since all the Old Testament citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews are from the LXX, it is to be expected that Hebrews' interpretation of the Jacob-Esau saga would also be derived from the LXX (Gheorghita 2003:3; Leschert 1994:16). As it happens, the translators of the LXX solved a number of difficulties in the Hebrew versions of Genesis by introducing emendations that indicate their theological understanding of the saga. It is possible that these emendations existed in versions of the Hebrews Bible available to the translators and which are now no more extant. Even so, the LXX translations provide an instructive basis for understanding how the inspired authors of the New Testament, such as the author of Hebrews, interpreted the scriptures. Four of these emendations are of particular interest, namely, (a) the parallels between Jacob's migration and the exodus of Israel, (b) the elimination of ambiguities in the MT's account of Jacob's wrestling encounter with the angel at Peniel, (c) the interesting translation of Genesis 32:28b, and (d) the depiction of Jacob's return to Bethel. These will now be explained in turn.

### 3.3.1. *Jacob's migration from Paddanaram in Genesis LXX*

As is the case with the prophetic interpretation, aspects of Jacob's flight from Paddanaram to Bethel are translated in such a way that the whole flight parallels the exodus of Israel from Egypt. For example, Genesis 31:46 (LXX) contains the phrase καὶ ἔπιον ('and drank') the equivalent of which is lacking in the MT. It preempts, however, Exodus 24:11 (LXX) in which the migrating Israelites ἔφαγον καὶ ἔπιον ('ate and drank') at the foot of Mount Sinai. Similarly, and as noted by Harl (1989:235), Rachel's words in Genesis 31:15, that her father *mekārānū*, 'sold us', is translated with the interesting phrase πεπρακεν γαρ ημδς, which appears to be a careful play on words aimed at paralleling Rachel's life with Israel's slavery in Egypt.

Moreover, Jacob's hurried departure from Paddanaram in Genesis 31:20 LXX is rendered with the word ἀποδιδράσκει, a word which was more often used for the escape of a slave. Hayward (2005:41–45) has also identified that the description of Jacob's encounter with the camps of angels at Mahanaim in Genesis 32 is rendered in such a way that it appears to parallel Moses' experience at the burning bush. Unlike the Hebrew MT which lacks that phrase, Genesis 32:2 (LXX) indicates that Jacob ἀναβλέψας εἶδεν ('looked up') to see the angels, an emphasis which appears to pre-empt Exodus 3:2. Thus, in theologically paralleling Jacob's migration from Paddaranam to Bethel with the exodus of Israel to the Promise, the reader of the LXX translation is provided guidance on how to interpret the narrative.

### 3.3.2. *Translation of the wrestling at Penuel in the LXX*

The LXX translators reduced the ambiguities in the MT's description of Jacob's wrestling match with the angel at Penuel, and in so doing provided explicit guidance on the theological interpretation of the narrative. So, for example, Genesis 32:32 (LXX) reads: ἀνέτειλεν δὲ

αὐτῷ ὁ ἥλιος, ἠνίκα παρήλθεν τὸ Εἶδος τοῦ θεοῦ· αὐτὸς (‘the sun shown upon him as he passed the divine form’). As translated by the NRSV, the MT reads, ‘the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip’. In other words, instead of naming the place as Penuel, as it is in the MT, the LXX translates it as Εἶδος θεου (divine form). In this way, the LXX parallels the wrestling episode with the liturgical blessing in which God’s countenance ‘shines’ upon his people (Num 6:25–26). Put another way, the wrestling with the angel is interpreted by the LXX as an importunate plea for God’s blessing and favour.

### *3.3.3. The LXX translation of Genesis 32:28b*

A crucial editorial change was made in the translation of Genesis 32:28b which the MT, as translated by the NRSV, reads, ‘you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed’. In the LXX, one of the words ‘and’ in the MT is removed and the verbal form of ‘prevail’ is emended into an adjective. The resulting rendering of Genesis 32:28b (LXX) reads, *Οτι ενισχυσας μετα θεου και ανθρωπον δυνατος* (‘you have prevailed with God and with humans you are powerful’).

This rendering separates the angel’s eulogy into two dissimilar parts, namely, (a) with God, Jacob prevails, and (b) with men he is strong or powerful. So, in addition to the blessing and change of name, the LXX portrays Jacob as conferred with two separate virtues, namely, one virtue is towards God and the other is towards men. As will become apparent shortly, this separation of the angel’s eulogy into two discrete virtues became vital for the interpretation by Hebrews, with one virtue, peace, towards everyone, and the other virtue, holiness, towards God. Incidentally, a similar two-way directed interpretation is also followed by Philo.

### 3.3.4. *Jacob's return to Bethel in the LXX*

The interesting choice of ἐπιψάνη to translate God's self-revelation to Jacob in Bethel (Gen 35:7; *niḡlū* in the MT), and the fact that this is the only place in Genesis LXX where the word is used, is also significant. This peculiar choice of word may suggest that the translators invested the Bethel encounter with profound sacred meaning. Indeed, the LXX links ἐπιψάνη with 'seeing' God's face in the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:25–26: ἐπιφάναι κύριος τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ ἐλέησαι σε, ἐπάραι κύριος τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ δώη σοι εἰρήνην (in the NRSV: 'the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace'). Consequently, it may be concluded that the three major motifs of the Jacob tradition at Bethel and Penuel are grace, seeing God's face, and peace, all of which are echoed in the priestly blessing of God's people.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.3.5. *Summary of the Jacob tradition in the LXX*

The LXX translation of some of the key elements of the Jacob tradition correlates well with the interpretation by the prophets as typological prefiguration of Israel's migration to the Promise. Moreover, Jacob's wrestling match at Penuel is interpreted as importunate seeking of God's blessing, which is rewarded also with 'seeing' God's face and receiving his peace. The LXX translation then illustrates the progressive theological interpretation of the Jacob tradition that paved the way for various trajectories among interpreters in Second Temple Judaism (STJ), and Hebrews.

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<sup>7</sup> The Psalter also contains several references that link God's blessings, grace, and peace with the manifestation of God's face (e.g. Pss 11:7; 16:11; 17:15; 21:7; 27:4,13; 36:10; 42:3; 61:8; 63:3; 140:14. For an analysis of the background of the language of seeing God in the Psalms, see Smith 1988:171–183.

### 3.4. Excursus: interpretation of the Jacob traditions in Philo's works

A brief excursus into how relevant elements of the Jacob traditions were interpreted in some of the literature of STJ is warranted, since they parallel how Hebrews also interpreted the traditions. Of key interest is the interpretation by Philo.<sup>8</sup> It must be forcefully stated from the outset that the author of Hebrews was no student of Philo. His thorough-going Christology, his restrained allegorical method which is Christocentric and his full subscription to the primitive Christian kerygma marks him out as diametrically different from Philonism. The differences between these two authors are 'so critical as to make it highly unlikely that any similarities of vocabulary are due to the direct influence of the one upon the other' (Williamson 1970:9).

Even so, it must not be dismissed as irrelevant that both Philo and the author of Hebrews were contemporary diaspora Jews, immersed in the LXX and sharing roughly similar interpretative traditions. A few of the parallels in their hermeneutical approaches have, for example, been described in a number of specific passages of Hebrews, such as the Melchizedek *Midrash* of Hebrews 7 (Thompson 1977:209–223) and the language of 'perfection' in the whole epistle (Dey 1975). Accordingly,

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<sup>8</sup> The interesting case of the DSS fragment labelled 4Q158 in which a quotation of the Penuel encounter (Gen 32:24–32), is fused with Exodus 4:27–28 may suggest that the Qumran community paralleled Jacob's experience at Penuel with Moses' experience at the burning bush in Sinai, as the LXX also does (cf. Tov 1995:653). The affinities between Qumran and Hebrews have been noted by O'Neill (2000:24–38), Bateman (1995:11–27) and Fitzmyer (1963:305–321). For a discussion of how the theology associated with Bethel became transformed into the theology of Mount Zion in the literature of STJ, as in Jubilees 32:9–22; *Genesis Rabba* 69:7; *Targum Yerushalmi I* Genesis 28:11, 17; *Targum Neofiti* 28:17, see Houtman (1977:337–351). Josephus, like his contemporaries regarded the Romans as descendants of Esau (Feldman 1988:101).

a brief examination of some of Philo's interpretations of the Jacob traditions may help shed light on that by Hebrews.

Philo indeed interpreted the flight and exile of Jacob in allegorical terms as equivalent to spiritual exercises to improve the patriarch, comparable to the training of an athlete. The younger Jacob, to Philo, symbolised toil and development (*De Sac* 119), and lover of virtue (*De Somniis* I.8.45) who through his struggles overthrew passions and wickedness (*Legum Allegoriae* III.68.190). His very name signified learning and progress (*De ebrietate* 20.82). There is also a recurring commentary on the education of both Jacob and Esau. Throughout, Jacob is obedient to his parents, whereas Esau is 'obstinate and ignorant' (*De virtutibus* 38.208). Jacob, therefore, needed training, the objectives of which were twofold, namely, to escape from Esau who represented evil, and to learn virtue and perfection. Using the notion of suffering as educational, Philo interpreted Jacob's hardships as pruning and as means of character formation (*De Ebrietate* 80–81). As we shall find, similar emphases occur in Hebrews 12:1–13.

Philo also allegorically interpreted the wrestling encounter as an exhibition contest at a graduation ceremony to mark the completion of the training of the athlete. The wrestling, to Philo, represented a diligent struggle to overcome what was wrong in Jacob (*De Mutatione Nominum* XII. 81). He compared the angel to a 'gymnastic trainer, [who] invites him to the gymnasia, and standing firmly, compels him to wrestle with him until he has rendered his strength so great as to be irresistible, changing his ears by the divine influences into eyes' (*On Dreams* XX. 1.129). So, to Philo, the reward for Jacob was to spiritually progress from just hearing God to 'seeing' God.

Like the LXX, Philo stressed that the angel's eulogy depicts virtues in two directions, namely, (a) Jacob is stamped with a better character and

perfected in virtue in relation to men, and at the same time, (b) he acquires a new name which is in God's direction. Philo uniquely defined this new name, Israel, as meaning 'the one who sees God' (*Legum Allegoriae* II.9; III.66). This special designation became, for Philo, an overriding paradigm for depicting the goals of increased 'spirituality' (Hayward 2005:192). He connected his notion of 'seeing God' with the sanctuary motif, as the ultimate goal of piety and spiritual growth (Hayward 2005:182 cf. Goodenough 1935:8). Those who wrestle effectively with evil passions and win will, like Jacob, be granted the crown of beholding God in his sanctuary (*De Mutatione Nominum*, XII 81 cf. *Leg Alleg.* III.100). These Philonic interpretations of the Jacob traditions are different from what is found in Hebrews. They nevertheless provide a context for understanding how the author of Hebrews also employs the Jacob-Esau saga to address the pastoral difficulties of his readers.

#### 4. Echoes of the Jacob-Esau Saga in Hebrews 12:14–17

From Hebrews 12:1,<sup>9</sup> the author of Hebrews increases the tempo of his movement motif towards its rhetorical climax at Mount Zion in Hebrews 12:18–29. His overall aim in this section of the homily was to exhort his readers towards devout faithfulness, disciplined endurance, and dogged persistence to the finishing line. He achieves this in a variety of ways, one of which was to employ the Jacob-Esau saga as an Old Testament narrative background in Hebrews 12:14–17. Yet, even

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<sup>9</sup>Commentators differ in identifying the beginning of the subsection. Lane argues that there is a complete shift in genre and mood from the historical recital in Heb 11 to pastoral exhortation from Hebrews 12:1 (1991:403). In this sense, Hebrews 12:1–3 is an introduction followed by its development in the subsequent passages. Others, such as DeSilva (2000:425), argue for starting the section at Hebrews 12:4, and regard Hebrews 12:1–3 as crowning the list of the faithful with Jesus. Since there is considerable crossover between these subsections, I shall treat the chapter as a whole.

before this passage, there are anticipations<sup>10</sup> of the saga in Hebrews 12:1–13, a brief enumeration of which are therefore in order.

#### 4.1. The Jacob tradition in Hebrews 12:1–13

The anticipations in Hebrews 12:1–13 include, (a) the athletic imageries of running and wrestling in Hebrews 12:1–3, (b) the use of Isaiah 35 in Hebrews 12:1–13, (c) the education of sons as metaphor for endurance in Hebrews 12:5–11, and (d) the reference to lameness and joint dislocation in Hebrews 12:13.

In Hebrews 12:1, the author transfers the hearer/reader into an athletic gymnasium to describe the Christian life as a race and *αγωνα*, ('wrestling contest') in the presence of a great 'cloud of witnesses'. Other athletic imageries include the wrestling terminologies in Hebrews 12:4 (*ἀντικατέστητε*, 'resist face to face', and *ἀνταγωνιζόμενοι*, 'struggle'), and *γεγυμνασμενοις* ('disciplined exercise') in Hebrews 12:11<sup>11</sup> (cf. Croy 1998:43–44; Pfitzner 1967). These athletic imageries need not directly refer to the Jacob traditions *per se*. However, as already noted, there was a tendency towards interpreting Jacob's flights, and his wrestling match in particular, along lines similar to what occurs in Philo's works. There is no reason why the author of Hebrews would

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<sup>10</sup>Anticipations and pre-announcements are common literary strategies of the author in which he announces and intimates subjects in advance, but does not pursue them until several verses or passages later (cf. Vanhoye 1963). Even before the anticipations in Hebrews 12:1–13, the author mentions Jacob on three occasions, namely, his sharing God's promise with Isaac and Abraham (Heb 11:9), receiving the blessings from his father Isaac (Heb 11:20) and blessing Joseph's sons just before his death (Heb 11:21). It is evident therefore that our author was very familiar with the Jacob tradition.

<sup>11</sup>This emphasis on training is also found in Hebrews 5:14. Other athletic imageries in Hebrews include the Christian life as a contest in Hebrews 10:32, and possibly Hebrews 6:20 where Jesus is described as 'forerunner on our behalf' who has entered the Holy of Holies.



not have made a similar interpretation, but infused with his overriding Christocentric hermeneutics.

The frequent use of motifs and explicit quotations from Isaiah 35 in Hebrews 12:1–13 (Isa 35:1–2 in Heb 12:1–3, Isa 35:3 in Heb 12:12–13, Isa 35:6 in Heb 12:13, and Isa 35:5 and 8 in Heb 12:14) equally anticipate the subsequent use of the Jacob-Esau saga in Hebrews 12:14–17. As noted already, in both Hebrews 12 and Isaiah 35, the journey of the returning faithful ends at Mount Zion. It is not possible to prove whether the author of Hebrews exactly intended to indicate the influence of the Jacob traditions behind his use of Isaiah 35. All the same, his recourse to the prophetic passage adds to the overall theme of the influence of the traditions in this section of his homily.

The author's focus on suffering as a source of παιδεύει 'instruction' (Heb 12:7a, b, 8a, 9a, 10a, 11a) and the frequent use of υἱός, 'son' (Heb 12:5ab, 6, 7ab, 8) generates a potent imagery of a household in which children received instruction and training for their future roles. In this household, discipline is a mark of legitimate sonship.<sup>12</sup> Given the prominence of this theme in reflections on the saga in Second Temple Judaism,<sup>13</sup> it is likely that this may have added to the author's recourse to the saga in Hebrews 12:14–17.

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<sup>12</sup> In the earlier parts of the homily, Hebrews linked the Sonship of Jesus with the believer's sonship (e.g. Heb 2:10-15). Here, in Hebrews 12:1–13, a similar picture emerges where Jesus' attitude to suffering becomes a paradigm for his brothers and sisters. For exploration of the concept of sibling relationship in Hebrews, see Gray 2003, 355–351 and Croy 1998:196–222.

<sup>13</sup>In the Book of Jubilees, for example, there are extensive embellishments of the Isaac household situation depicted in Genesis 25:27–28; 27:41–47. Jacob, it is said, learned to write, whereas Esau repudiated any such education (Jub 19:14). Jacob is portrayed as extremely close to Abraham, who saw to his training to inherit the promises (Jub 19:26–30). In contrast, Esau is described as unruly, and of whose deeds Abraham

The references to the lame and, particularly, ἐκτραπή (joint dislocation) in Hebrews 12:13 are probably not meant to be deliberate allusion to Jacob (Gen 32:25).<sup>14</sup> All the same, the potent imagery of a traveller returning to Zion while limping with a dislocated joint may well have prompted the author's recourse to allusions to the Jacob-Esau saga in the next verse (Heb 12:14). Certainly, when combined with the athletic and wrestling imageries, the explicit and implicit use of Isaiah 35, and the notion of educative discipline of sons, the reference to the lame and joint dislocation metaphors in Hebrews 12:1–13 indicates the author's anticipation of the saga in Hebrews 12:14–17.

#### 4.2. Echoes of the Jacob-Esau saga in Hebrews 12:14–17

Hebrews 12:14–17 follows these anticipations with each of the clauses making a homiletic interpretation of some of the episodes in the Jacob-Esau saga. The positive exhortation of Hebrews 12:14–17 echoes Jacob, who 'sees the Lord', whereas the counterbalancing negative warning is explicitly associated with Esau. Jacob represents the persevering and enduring people of faith migrating to Mount Zion, and Esau represents those who reject the life of faith and are in the end also rejected at Mount Sinai. In encouraging the congregation to pursue peace with everyone and holiness towards the Lord, the author of Hebrews has transformed Jacob's dual pursuits in the tradition into spiritual quests for these two Christian virtues. Just as through his importunity and perseverance with the angel the patriarch obtained the grace and blessing, the congregation should also persevere for the same. Just as Esau, despite his equally importunate plea before Isaac, failed to obtain

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disapproved. Josephus also commented on Esau's disregard for parental discipline as opposed to Jacob's submission (*Antiquities* I.18.4).

<sup>14</sup>Though Genesis 32 LXX highlights that Jacob left Penuel limping, it refers to the *numbness* of the thigh (32:26 and 33) rather than dislocation of the hip joint as the MT does.

the blessing, apostates who fall short of God's grace will also be rejected.

With this narrative echoing in the background, the first readers of Hebrews, who shared this scriptural 'symbolic world' with the author, were being drawn to associate with, and perceive themselves as joining, their 'forefather' Jacob/Israel in returning to Bethel/Zion. Though limping from persecution, they should be assured of God's grace and blessing and a Bethel/Mount Zion epiphany. They should therefore repudiate the unfaithfulness of Esau. An analysis of these echoes in the background of Hebrews 12:14–17 now follows.

#### *4.2.1. Διωκετε in Hebrews 12:14 and the Jacob-Esau saga*

The encouragement to strive for, or pursue peace was a common first century exhortation (e.g. Rom 12:18; 14:19; 1 Pet 3:11; cf. Ps 33:15b LXX). With the community experiencing public persecution and congregational friction from within, such an exhortation addresses a palpable danger. However, the words have also been couched to fit into the themes of the homily, as well as generate resonating scriptural background that gives rhetorical force to the words.

One indication of this use of the tradition is the use of the word διωκετε ('strive') in Hebrews 12:14. Διωκετε fuses the two athletic imageries of running a race and wrestling that pervades in the preceding Hebrews 12:1–13. On the one hand, it describes a swift and hurried dash in pursuit of something, or while being pursued (so the NRSV). On the other hand, it also describes a purposeful struggle, striving or wrestling for something (so the ESV and KJV). It is in these two fused elements that it echoes the Jacob traditions.

In addition, *διωκετε* was more often used in the negative hostile sense to describe the persecution or harassment of an opponent. Coming as it does after the athletic and wrestling imageries in Hebrews 12:1–13; *διωκετε* indicates that Hebrews 12:14–17 continues the migration motif. The persecuted congregation were ironically being urged to 'persecute' peace. This imagery fits the picture of Jacob's hurried flight from Laban, and resonates with his stop at Penuel, where the theme of pursuit is combined with that of wrestling with the angel and the peace which follows it.

#### *4.2.2. Peace and holiness in Hebrews 12:14 and the Jacob-Esau saga*

The linkage of peace with holiness as the goals of the believer's pursuit is peculiar to Hebrews.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the structure of Hebrews 12:14a suggests that the author is making a distinction between peace and holiness in terms of their subjects. Peace, he notes, is towards men, whereas holiness is towards God. This echoes the two-level interpretation of Jacob's reward for his victorious wrestling with the angel. Just as Jacob strove 'with God and with humans' (Gen 32:28), the readers are now urged to strive for peace with humans and holiness towards God.

In Genesis 27–35, Jacob pursued peace in his relationships with Laban, Esau, and the Shechemites. His temporary settlement at *Salem* in Shechem (Gen 33:18a LXX) would have attracted the attention of the

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<sup>15</sup>Though the New Testament contains separate exhortations to pursue peace and also to pursue holiness, this is the only place where the two are explicitly linked (e.g. Matt 5:8; 1 Thess 4:3; Rom 6:19; 1 Cor 1:30; 1 Pet 1:2). For Lane (1991:449) and Isaacs (2002:146), this linkage suggests that the two virtues are to be interpreted objectively rather than as subjective experiences. One may quibble with this drastic distinction between objective and subjective peace and holiness. The author's use of *διωκετε* demonstrates his overall theology in which the movement motif is used in both an objective and subjective sense. For, like salvation (Heb 2:1–4), rest (Heb 3–4), perfection (Heb 5–6) and 'the promise' (Heb 11), peace and holiness are also to be pursued under the overall proviso of obtaining God's grace and mercy (cf. Heb 4:16).

author of Hebrews, for Hebrews specifically observes the significance of the meaning of Salem as ‘peace’ with regard to Melchizedek (Heb 7:2). The wrestling match represented the climax of Jacob’s pursuit of this peace. It was after that encounter that he could settle for peace with Esau. Peace with human beings could therefore only be achieved as God grants us peace, for God is the source of peace (Heb 13:20). So peace in Hebrews 12:14a is both objective and subjective.

If the proposal that the Jacob tradition echoes in the background of Hebrews 12:14 is correct, then it must be taken that the μετὰ πάντων refers to everyone, including the persecutors, and not exclusively to believers. Interpreters disagree as to the likely referent for the μετὰ πάντων, whether it applied only to Christians (so Lane 1991:449–50) or to everyone including the persecutors (so Bruce 1990:348; cf. DeSilva 2000:457–459). Often, the judgement is made based on passages outside Hebrews which exhort Christians to pursue peace with their neighbours (e.g. Koester 2001:531) or, in some cases, on subjective elements. However, none base the judgement on the passage itself. Giving due consideration to the influence of the Jacob tradition on Hebrews 12:14 provides objective criteria for resolving this problem. Just as Jacob pursued peace, even with his persecutor Esau, so also were the first readers being urged to pursue peace with all, including their persecutors.

Holiness or sanctification is to be pursued in a similar vein. The imperative tone of Hebrews 12:14b suggests an exhortation to pursue holy living or continue in the process of sanctification (cf. McCown 1981:59; Bruce 1990:348; Héring 1970:96; Rose 1963:116; cf. Isaacs 2002:146). However, this interpretation must be tempered with the fact that in Hebrews holiness is considered in a more objective positional sense than an ethical action to be performed. Consequently, like peace,

holiness is both objective and subjective. The congregation were to pursue holiness, but only under the proviso that it is God in Christ who provides the persevering believer with that virtue.

Consideration of how the Jacob traditions resonate in the background of the passage will further illuminate this understanding of Hebrews 12:14b. The change of the patriarch's name at Penuel represented a transformation of his spiritual status (Hamilton 1995:333; Horsley, 1987: 1–17). In the words of Ross (1985:349), 'Jacob's becoming Israel is the purification of character. Penuel marks the triumph of the higher over the lower elements of his life'. By demanding a confession of Jacob's name, the angel was designating Jacob's transformation: 'Your name shall no longer be Jacob' (Gen 32:28 LXX). This transformation is along the lines of perfection or holiness in Hebrews (cf. Peterson 1982).

Unlike Philo, the author of Hebrews would not have understood the transformation of Jacob in terms that excluded the operation of the grace of God. Nevertheless, what Philo shares in common with Hebrews is that in response to his perseverance and importunity, Jacob received a new character and quality from God.

#### *4.2.3. 'See the Lord' in Hebrews 12:14 and in the Jacob-Esau saga*

One of the strongest indications of echoes of the Jacob traditions in Hebrews 12:14-17 is the author's statement that without holiness, no one will 'see the Lord'. The majority of commentators regard the phrase as formulaic. So, according to Bruce (1990:348), for example, the phrase parallels 'the pure in heart' seeing God in Matthew 5:8, and follows on from the common Old Testament liturgical formula in which the righteous hope to see God in his temple at Mount Zion (Ps 11:7; 17:15; 36:10; 42:2; 63:2; 140:14).

In the New Testament, to ‘see the Lord’ was the main thrust of the believer’s eschatological hope (1 Cor 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Rev 22:4). Davies therefore interpreted the phrase in Hebrews as referring to seeing Jesus at his Second Coming (1967:123). Though such an interpretation may not be too far from the author’s intention, the emphasis in Hebrews 12:14 is not so much on the Second Coming of Christ as it is on the goal of the believer’s pilgrimage (cf. Koester 2001:531). Equally, DeSilva (2002:459) understands the phrase as synonymous with ‘eternal life’ as in Romans 6:22, and Lane argues that it is equivalent to coming ‘into the presence of God’ (1991:450). In all cases, holiness is no doubt a prerequisite for such an experience.

There are reasons, however, to believe that while it is possible that the author is quoting a well-known liturgical formula, the fact that this formulaic phrase was derived from the Jacob traditions explicitly served his rhetorical and pedagogic purposes. Certainly, upon reading about Esau shortly after, a first century Jewish reader of Hebrews 12:14–17 intimately familiar with the scriptures, as most Jewish readers were, would also have immediately heard echoes of Jacob’s Penueel experience in the background. At least, and as noted with regard to Philo’s interpretation of the tradition, the theology of the beatific vision of God was closely associated with the Jacob tradition (Balentine 1983:49–65; Fossum 1995:13–39; Hayward 2005:191; Kirk 1991:9; Smith, 1988: 171–183; cf. Bruce 1990:349 n.102). The use of the phrase in Hebrews 12:14 underlines this theological association.

#### *4.2.4. Obtaining God’s grace in Hebrews 12:15 and Jacob-Esau saga*

Hebrews 12:15–16, which is designed to counterbalance the positive exhortation of Hebrews 12:14, is made up of three parallel negative warnings with the same ultimate purpose of avoiding apostasy. Each one of these clauses is preceded by μη τις (‘not some’), and

successively increases in length and complexity, as is also the case in Hebrews 6:4–8. This literary structure of Hebrews 12:15–16 suggests that the author is progressively outlining the features of Esau's apostasy rather than describing different aspects of apostasy. In other words, each clause refers to an aspect of the apostate behaviour of Esau that must be rejected. This in turn supports the present proposal in which the positive section (Heb 12:14) is motivated by Jacob's experiences, and the negative section by Esau.

In the first clause of the warning, the readers are urged to ensure that 'no one fails to obtain the grace of God'. The author is here not insinuating that the believers do not already have God's grace (cf. Heb 4:16; Bruce, 1990:349 n.103). The sense of the clause suggests the need for a continuous supply of grace needed for the journey. The grace or favour of God is after all an important gift in the epistle, required by the pilgrim/migrant in his migration to God's city. The cultic expositions of the earlier and central portions of the epistle explain how this grace is secured and provided for the believer (cf. Heb 4:16 and 12:28). Therefore, it is clear that the inevitable consequence for failure to obtain grace is apostasy. There is no question of completing the migration without obtaining this grace.

The question is what is the Old Testament background of this first clause? Katz (1958:214) has proposed that the language of Deuteronomy 29:17 (LXX) may have supplied the author of Hebrews with a suitable paraphrase for Hebrews 12:15a. Indeed the use of  $\mu\eta\ \tau\iota\varsigma$  on two occasions in Deuteronomy 29:18 (LXX) may well support his interpretation. Nevertheless, the absence of any reference to favour or grace in Deuteronomy 29:18 (LXX) limits Katz's explanation. A more likely explanation is that the author had Esau in mind as an example of the person described in Deuteronomy 29:27 (LXX), as one who lived 'callously' and so failed to obtain the grace and favour of God.



Wilckens (1976:596) has pointed out that ὑστερῶν (‘fall short’, Heb 12:15) carries the connotations of arriving too late for a gift or blessing. Hence first century Jewish readers familiar with the Jacob-Esau saga would have had no difficulty in understanding the clause as indeed referring to Esau.

As noted earlier, the prominent motif of favour and blessing largely follows Jacob, whereas Esau is portrayed as one who failed to obtain the blessing despite his ‘exceedingly great and bitter cry’ (Gen 27:34). Whereas Jacob’s importunity with the angel led to obtaining the blessing, Esau’s desperate pleas could not reverse Isaac’s blessings. Accordingly, the warning to the readers to ensure that none from among them should fail to obtain the grace of God is a *double entendre* statement. On the one hand, they should all follow Jacob’s example of perseverance and importunity to retain the grace. On the other hand, they should equally make sure that none from among them becomes like Esau who fell short of obtaining that grace.

#### ***4.2.5. Root of bitterness that causes defilement in Hebrews 12:15 and Jacob-Esau saga***

Commentators generally agree that the more complex second clause in Hebrews 12:15–16 (i.e. ‘that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled’) is a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 29:17b (LXX) (cf. Koester 2001:531). This quotation warns against apostasy among the people of God. The ‘root of bitterness that springs forth a shoot’ in the deuteronomic context, directly described an individual or group of individuals within the covenantal community who rejected the covenantal life, turned to idol worship and thus caused abomination among God’s people. The phrase was subsequently employed to describe the broader concept of serious

sin within the community (e.g. IQH IV.14) and parallels the evil unbelieving heart which turns away from the living God (Heb 3:12).

Two possible intertextual allusions to the Jacob-Esau saga may be located as supporting the use of Deuteronomy 29:17b (LXX) in Hebrews 12:15. One relates to Esau and the other to Jacob. If, as we shall shortly argue, the third clause in Hebrews 12:15–16 describes Esau, then he could also be described as 'the root of bitterness'. As already noted, first century Jews regarded Esau as an apostate.

On the other hand, the paraphrase from Deuteronomy 29:17b (LXX) is further qualified by Hebrews to state that the root of bitterness leads to the defilement of many in the congregation. There is no reference to community defilement in Deuteronomy 29:17b (LXX), even though it is implied, and so it is possible that this is the author of Hebrews' own adaptation. In that case, the minor theme of defilement in Jacob's camp caused by the idols would suit the context very well (Gen 35:2–3). After all, Hebrews would likely have interpreted Moses' instructions in Deuteronomy 29:17b (LXX) as prefigured by Jacob's instructions in Genesis 35:2–4: 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you...' So, both intertextual allusions, i.e. evoking defilement in Jacob's camp, and describing Esau as 'root of bitterness', could have equally influenced the second clause. In both cases, the readers are urged not to emulate such negative examples.

#### *4.2.6. Esau in Hebrews 12:16–17 and the Jacob-Esau saga*

There are two main points of debate among interpreters regarding the reference to Esau in Hebrews 12:16–17. The first relates to whether Esau is being described as both sexually immoral and godless or only as a godless person. Though the argument cannot be fully rehearsed here, interpreting 'sexual immorality' as a literal description of Esau's behaviour introduces new difficulties into the passage. At the least such

a literal interpretation raises questions as to whether Hebrews regarded sexual immorality as equivalent to apostasy. Though he was no antinomian, it is unlikely that the author of Hebrews would have regarded sexual immorality *per se* as apostasy.

One proposed solution by interpreters to this particular problem is to argue that the word πορνος ('sexually immoral') is used on its own without reference to Esau. So Elliot (1917–18:44–45) for example, has argued that the participle η ('or') that separates πορνος ('sexually immoral') from βεβηλος ('godless person') indicates that the author of Hebrews did not have Esau in mind as *both* sexually immoral and godless. He suggests that πορνος is a separate category of sin against which the author warns the congregation. Similarly, Bruce (1990:350) believes that πορνος is being used literally, and since there is no biblical record of Esau's sexual immorality, the warning is a direct message to the congregation not to harbour any such persons in their midst. Indeed, the translators of the NIV also make this judgment by translating Hebrews 12:16a as 'see that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau'. In this sense, only 'godless' is said to apply to Esau.

As stated earlier, there are difficulties with this approach. It is true that the author of Hebrews would not have overlooked any deliberate sin (Heb 10:26–31). He warns in Hebrews 13:4 that God would punish the adulterer and sexually immoral person. Hence, he takes that sin extremely seriously. Even so, it is unlikely that he would have regarded sexual immorality *per se* as an unpardonable sin equivalent to apostasy (cf. Lindars 1991:14).

Moreover, his omission of another μη τις between πορνος and βεβηλος makes it likely that he had Esau in mind as *both* sexually immoral and godless. After all, passages such as Numbers 25:1–2 and Hosea 1:2 do the same thing in linking sexual immorality with idolatry. In addition,

several late Jewish traditions characterised Esau as a sensual and sexually immoral person (*Jub* 25:1; 7–8; 26:34; 35:13–14; Philo, *On the Virtues* 208–210, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4:201, *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.2; *Genesis Rabba* 65). There is no reason why the author of Hebrews would not have thought the same. Hence, even if Hebrews used πορνός in 12:16 literally, he was still referring to one of Esau's characteristics as a sexually immoral person.

Having said all that, however, it is much more likely that the author of Hebrews used both πορνός and βεβήλος in Hebrews 12:16a in a metaphorical sense to depict Esau as an apostate (cf. Malina 1972:10–17; Jensen 1978:161–184). A number of Old Testament passages certainly use these two terms to describe apostasy. Numbers 14:33 LXX, a chapter well known to Hebrews (cf. Heb 3–4), for example, describes the sin of apostasy in the wilderness as 'fornication'. Equally, Judges 2:17 describes the generation during the time of the Judges as people who 'lusted' after other gods. Πορνός and βεβήλος are therefore being used by Hebrews in the figurative sense as typical descriptors of an apostate like Esau. Such a person falls short of obtaining the grace of God. So, taking into serious consideration the idea that the Jacob-Esau saga provides the background to the passage reinforces this interpretation.

The second problem related to Esau's role in Hebrews 12:14–17 is with regard to the 'change of mind' in Hebrews 12:17. As several interpreters have noted, the clause is ambiguous (cf. Koester 2001:533). In the Genesis account, it was Isaac's change of mind which was at the fore. Yet, there is a sense in which the change of mind could be God's since the blessings on Jacob were regarded by Isaac as irrevocable (Gen 27:33). There is also a third sense in which the change of mind could be Esau's, since he had no opportunity to repent, certainly, not as much as Jacob had (Lane 1991:458). The ambiguity, therefore, relates to the

possibility that by ‘change of mind’ the author of Hebrews was referring to Esau’s, as well as Isaac’s and/or by proxy, God’s.

Taking into consideration the fact that the whole Jacob-Esau saga resonates in the background of the passage brings these difficulties into sharp relief. If, as I have argued, the positive example of the exhortation is an allusion to Jacob, then Hebrews is also contrasting the two in Hebrews 12:17. Just as Esau shed bitter tears before Isaac, Jacob sought the blessing of the angel with perseverance and importunity (cf. Hos 12:4). Jacob had the opportunity for his life of deceit to be changed, and he was granted the grace and blessing for that transformation to occur. Esau, on the other hand, did not. Both protagonists sought change of minds, theirs and God’s. Yet, whereas Jacob was duly blessed by the angel, and indeed blessed with peace, holiness, and ‘seeing’ God; Esau could bring about no change of mind at all, his own, Isaac’s, or God’s. He was rejected. The unbelieving apostate, Hebrews warns, could reach a point where personal psychological repentance becomes impossible, in addition to the divine refusal that comes with it.

#### *4.2.7. Οὐ γὰρ in Hebrews 12:18 and the Jacob tradition*

A final indication that the author was using the negative warning of the passage to portray Esau as an example of apostasy is the transition to the climactic Mount Zion passage in Hebrews 12:18. The inferential *οὐ γὰρ* (‘not for’) at the beginning of the verse links the single sentence in Hebrews 12:18–24 contrasting the Sinai and Mount Zion covenants with the contrast between Jacob and Esau in Hebrews 12:14–17. According to Casey (1977:308–309), the ‘two passages stand together as warning and ground for warning’. Esau in this context shared the same status of the apostates who ‘refused Him who speaks’ (Heb 12:25). Jacob on the other hand, who persisted to arrive at the glorious epiphanies of Bethel (cf. Gen 28:11–22; 32:1–2; 35:6–15) represents

those who persevere in faithfulness to arrive at Mount Zion. Accordingly, there is no reason to sharply separate Hebrews 12:14–17 from the subsequent passage Hebrews 12:18–29, as well as the preceding Hebrews 12:1–13. The Jacob traditions and their interpretations provide a coherent narrative background fitting together the whole of Hebrews 12.

#### *4.2.8. Jacob-Esau Saga and the socio-historical situation of the first readers of Hebrews*

Before summarising our findings and drawing out their implications, it is right to raise the important question as to whether it is at all plausible that the first readers/hearers of Hebrews would have readily detected such apparently intricate intertextual echoes resonating in the background of Hebrews 12:14–17. Such a query may, in the first place, be adequately answered by the simple fact that this manner of use of the Old Testament is the consistent method employed by the author of Hebrews in the whole letter. Our passage is no different from other parts of the epistle. So, in effect, this question really relates to other sections of Hebrews as well (cf. Docherty 2009).

In addition, however, it can be argued that the putative socio-historical situation of the first readers of Hebrews would most likely have made them amenable to detecting immediately the Jacob-Esau saga resonating in the background of our specific passage, Hebrews 12:14–17. Despite a number of disagreements in some of the details of this socio-historical situation, contemporary scholarship appears to have reached a considerable degree of consensus on its broad outline. It is widely held, for example, that the first readers were most likely based in Rome, were mostly (if not all) Jewish, and were experiencing persecution from their non-Christian neighbours, most of them Romans

(e.g. Allen 2010:61–74; Cockerill 2012:19–24; Koester 2001:64–79; O'Brien 2010:15–25).

In that case, the first readers would certainly have regarded Esau as the progenitor of their Roman persecutors. After all, most first century Jews believed that the Romans descended from Esau (Feldman 1988:101). Stiebert has indeed argued that this perception of the Romans by first century Jews begun with the Old Testament prophets not only in applying the Esau narratives specifically to Edom, but also in the wider prophetic polemics against the Babylonian oppressors of the Jews. In her words, the ‘negative depiction of Esau in the literature after the Hexateuch, belongs to the larger pattern of prophetic inversion and anti-foreign Second Temple ideology’ (2002:33). Accordingly, the first readers of Hebrews would not have missed the glaring paradox whereby the faithful descendants of Jacob were being again persecuted by the descendants of Esau.

The explicit reference to Esau in Hebrews 12:14–17, coming as it does near the rhetorical climax of his homily, therefore, played a very important rhetorical and polemical function in the author’s efforts to shore up the flagging faith of his persecuted Jewish congregation in the diaspora, likely in Rome. By juxtaposing Jacob and Esau, the author was using an Old Testament language as a code to identify the different behaviours and outcomes between persevering believers and others in their society who had not only rejected the gospel but opposed those who persevered in it. Apostates from among them would be following the footsteps of Esau, who became the persecutor of ‘the forefathers’.

#### *4.2.9. Summary of echoes of Jacob-Esau Saga in Hebrews 12:14–17*

In summary, it has been shown that several elements of the Jacob traditions and their interpretations by the prophets and literature of

Second Temple Judaism provided the narrative background for the warning passage of Hebrews 12:14–17. The positive section echoes themes associated with Jacob, while the negative section echoes themes associated with Esau. As summarised in Table 1 below, each of the individual clauses also derives its rhetorical force from the background generated by the Jacob-Esau saga. The first readers who would have readily appreciated these intertextual links would have also understood the passage as associating them with Jacob, and urging them to therefore repudiate the bad example of Esau.

*Table 1 Summary of echoes of the Jacob tradition in Hebrews 12:14-17*

<b>Clause</b>	<b>Background in Jacob-Esau saga and its interpretations</b>
<b>διωκετε</b> (‘strive’)	Jacob’s swift and hurried dash in pursuit or while being pursued, his purposeful striving or wrestling with the angel, and his dogged efforts towards peace with Esau, Laban and the Shechemites.
<b>Peace and holiness</b>	The two-level interpretation of Jacob’s reward for his victorious wrestling with the angel, namely, peace with his persecutors as well as holiness through his transformation of name and character
<b>‘see the Lord’</b>	The first century theology of the beatific vision derived from the idea of Jacob as one who ‘sees the Lord’



<p><b>Failure to obtain God’s grace</b></p>	<p>Esau as exemplar of the description in Deuteronomy 29:27 LXX, namely, as one who failed to obtain the grace of God, in sharp contrast with Jacob whose importunity was rewarded with divine grace.</p>
<p><b>‘root of bitterness’</b></p>	<p>Esau as apostate ‘root of bitterness’ and defilement in Jacob’s camp caused by the idols (Gen 35:2–3).</p>
<p><b>Explicit reference to Esau</b></p>	<p>The notion of Esau as a sensual and sexually immoral person was not uncommon among first century Jews. But more likely used as figurative language to describe Esau as apostate. The reference to ‘change of mind’ sharply contrasts the failed importunity of Esau with Jacob’s successful importunity.</p>
<p><b>Others</b></p>	<p>The anticipations in Hebrews 12:1–13 (athletic and wrestling imageries, educative discipline of sons, the use of Isa 35 and the reference to joint dislocation in Heb 12:13) and the inferential link, Οὐ γὰρ, with the following passage describing the arrival at Mount Zion.</p>

## 5. Conclusion and Implications of the Findings

It has been argued, convincingly I hope, that the Jacob-Esau saga and its interpretations by the Old Testament prophets, and Second Temple Judaism, echo in the background of the exhortations of Hebrews 12:14–17. Jacob’s strivings, flight, and pursuit of peace even with his

persecutors, his persistent importunity in wrestling with the angel at Penuel, the resulting reception of the blessing of God's favour and grace, the transformation in his character, his 'seeing' God's face, and the Bethel encounter are all interpreted in a manner as to closely associate the patriarch with the readers. In luring his readers/hearers to share in the positive collective memory of the Jacob tradition, our author predisposed them to heed the subsequent dire warning to avoid the apostasy of Esau.

There are several implications of these findings. First of all, as has been shown, the Jacob-Esau saga helps explain how the passage fits into the flow of the argument of Hebrews 12. The chapter reflects the migration to Zion motif, beginning with perseverance in faithfulness, through endurance of suffering to ensuring the completion of the pursuit of the goals of the migration, arriving at Zion in peace and holiness. The ethical instructions directly address the congregation; yet, they derive their rhetorical force from their link to the Jacob-Esau saga. This Old Testament narrative lures the hearer/reader to partake of the life of the migrating Jacob and so repudiate the apostasy of Esau.

Secondly, the Jacob-Esau saga provides an objective basis for interpreting the *μετα παντων* of Hebrews 12:14. On the basis of the intertextual links, *μετα παντων* should be rendered as 'all manner of people', including the persecutors.

Thirdly the Jacob-Esau saga provides a coherent narrative background to the apparently disjointed ethical instructions in the passage. This certainly enhances the meaning and rhetorical import of the clauses in the passage.

Fourthly, as has been shown, the proposal fits very well with the putative socio-historical circumstances of the readers. They would more likely have associated their persecutors with Esau, and so readily

personalised this exhortation in a pastoral manner. Their faith as Christians had become a major source of suffering and resulted in their discouragement, flagging zeal and spiritual malaise. In inviting them to imaginatively share in Jacob's experiences, their hope of a rewarding epiphany just around the corner would be rekindled, and the warning to pay careful attention to their faith would achieve its intended results.

Fifthly, this proposal suggests that Hebrews was a significant relay station on the post-biblical Christian interpretations of Jacob's peculiar experience of the patriarch at Penuel (Sheridan, 2002:218–229).

Finally, I suggest that this proposal will enhance homiletic activities on Hebrews 12:14–17. Contemporary preachers will, for example, find the Jacob traditions as important illustrative resources in their expositions on the various clauses in Hebrews 12:14–17. Furthermore, I suggest that framers of the Church Lectionary Readings may well consider pairing readings of the Jacob traditions in Genesis 27–35 with Hebrews 12. As this article has shown, Hebrews 12 provides a New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament Jacob traditions. The two are best read together.

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