

# On Jacob and Diomedes

DANIEL VALLS RODRIGUEZ

*He maketh supplication unto God, and he accepteth him,  
and he seeth his face with shouting, and he returneth to man his righteousness.*  
Job 33:26

*Cunning must he be and knavish, who would go beyond thee  
in all manner of guile, aye, though it were a god that met thee.*  
Odyssey 13.291–292

*It goes without saying that this is a task whose proper performance goes much  
beyond my power; but we cannot define our tasks by our powers, for our  
powers become known to us through the performance of our tasks, and it is  
better to fail nobly than to succeed basely.*

Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections"

## I: CAUSE

My inquiry begins with a choice between two ways of life. Philosophy, on the one hand, is the desire to know ends in themselves through nature. Religion, on the other hand, is accepting an unknowable end through tradition. Making the right choice is what I understand to be virtue. The virtuous way of life seems to be one way or another. This is the modern dilemma: given the choice, do we follow nature or tradition? I imagine a middle way, one by which, as Socrates claims in the *Meno*, "it appears that virtue is being accrued to us men by divine providence, for those human beings to whom it may be accruing." If we take this seriously as the noblest account man can give, how may we know divine providence? How can we know when the gods seem silent?

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DANIEL VALLS RODRIGUEZ is completing his MA at St. John's College. He received his BA from the University of Miami, where he wrote his senior thesis on the link between Hippocratic medicine and Socratic philosophy in Plato's *Phaedrus*. His research interests include the relation between gender and philosophy in Plato, Shakespeare, and Nietzsche and the metaphysical problem of nothingness.

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The nearest we've been to knowing divine providence is through received traditions: divinely inspired accounts of our ancestors, the men who talked with gods. *Genesis* and the *Iliad* are the primary examples of such accounts: they are the oldest (both in form and matter) and the most influential in human history. Though one is associated wholly with "revelation" and the other a form of "reason," their common claim to being divinely inspired must be taken seriously. If we take these accounts as guides to divine providence, where should we start?

If virtue is accrued excellence, we must begin with the most excellent ancestors, or the human beings who accrued the most by divine providence. This narrows the range of choices considerably. My inquiry into virtue will begin with Jacob and Diomedes, the men who fought with gods and survived. What I have to offer is a reading of the wrestling match of Jacob together with the *aristeia* of Diomedes. Their lives may present a way of direct revelation leading to right reason for mankind, an ancient balance which we enlightened moderns may never have access to, and which is not necessarily acquired through tradition alone.

Given the starting point outlined above, I think a rational engagement with *Genesis* and the *Iliad* as texts distinct from the traditions they founded and commented upon is necessary. This initial attempt to reasonably engage with the primary texts of Jerusalem and Athens necessarily excludes the traditions that emerged from them. Engaging with the Jewish tradition or the Hellenistic scholia assumes that both have authority equal to *Genesis* and the *Iliad*, and that assumption can only be made by someone who is already a believer in the authority of received revelation.

If anything, a respect for the depth the tradition claims precludes any sort of unthinking engagement with the tradition. This is neither a Jewish nor a Greek paper, so it would be disingenuous to pretend to be either by putting on the tradition as an authoritative costume. However, this is not an atheistic account either. Chesterton's model of "arriving at Orthodoxy" is analogous to the plan of this paper: arriving at the limit of human agency through an encounter with the divine, Jacob and Diomedes both engage with their fellow men in radically different ways afterward. Jacob engages with his wronged brother with the fear of the Lord in mind, aware till his death of his vulnerability and dependence on divine assistance. Diomedes emerges sympathetic to his sworn enemy because of

their shared mortality, and roused by the confrontation with the divine into changing the war from one of justice to honor.

As parallel lines arrive at separate points, so Jacob and Diomedes arrive at different virtues: Jacob's awareness of dependency on the awful Yahweh implies the eventual dependence of the Jewish people upon the law while Diomedes's awareness of mortality and pursuit of honor as a palliative implies the eventual pursuit Odysseus initiates of divinely supported wisdom that will outlive and change humanity. Although the patriarchs maintained a people, Homeric heroism eventually led to our modern state, and the question of how to arrive at Odysseus's turn again must consider both.

## II: NATURE AND DESIRE

We may begin our inquiry into Jacob and Diomedes by analyzing their names. A man's name may not be his nature, but it categorically initiates it. Every man knows another by his name, and this is especially true of us readers. I cannot distinguish the carnal man from the words describing him as I can distinguish myself in the mirror from my diaries. Names seem especially important for *Genesis* and the *Iliad*, where the meaning of a man's name is the context for his story. My Greek is better than my Hebrew, so I'll start with the Argive hero.

*Diomédēs* is traditionally understood as "Zeus-counseled," but this is more its likely sense as a name than the literal meaning of the words. *Diós* means "of Zeus" while *díos* can mean "god-like." *Méde* means either "counsels" or "wiles," as in either *médo*—"I protect, rule over"—or *médomai*—"I am prepared for, contrive." The name Diomedes is literally "the counsels of Zeus" or "God-like wiles," a name establishing his importance in an epic recording how through war "the plan (*boulé*) of Zeus came to fulfillment" (1.5), especially for a man called the best "in war" and "in council (*boulêi*)" by Nestor (9.53–54).

Does Diomedes, for all intents and purposes the third in command behind Agamemnon and Nestor and third best behind Achilles and Ajax the Greater, possess god-like cunning in order to fulfill the counsels of Zeus? Agamemnon and Thetis seek gratification from Diomedes and Zeus respectively in their first appearances. Thetis makes harsh demands of Zeus, reminding him that she restored his power, "but he was not saying anything (*d' ou ti proséphe*)," as Diomedes responded to Agamemnon's censure of his behavior negatively compared to that of his

father Tydeus (Cf. 1.511 with 4.401), indicating that both have self-control in the face of accusation. Diomedes' advice in the same scene to Sthenelus is "let us twain also bethink us (*medómetha*) of furious valour," an exhortation Hera repeats to Athena (cf. 4.418 with 5.718).

I turn now to the Hebrew counterpart. *Ya'akov* means "Heel-grabber" for all intents and purposes. I am less sure of *'akov* meaning either "to hold by the heel or trip" or "to search or investigate." Like Diomedes, Jacob receives this name at birth, but unlike him, his name records his first action and belatedness (25:26). His filial fraud elicits a negative pun on his name from Esau (27:36). Jacob's life is defined by his original action and the lack of primogeniture he tries to fulfill. This is analogous to Adam's curse. Ominously, Jacob's name recalls the serpent in the Garden of Eden: the serpent's curse is to bruise the heel of Eve's son (3:15), as Jacob holds the heel of his brother.

Jacob's tripping and searching further reminds me of the serpent's "cunning," that *'arum* which in the Septuagint is *phrónimos* or "prudence" (3:1). *'Arum* also means "hairless" or "naked," as Adam and Eve are before the fall (2:25). This dual meaning is simultaneously recalled and evaded in Jacob the smooth-skinned twin being *tam*, which means "simple," "plain" or "blameless" (25:27); in the Septuagint we have *áplastos*, "unaffected" or "natural." During his final blessing, Jacob wishes that his sons Dan and Gad may attack the heels of their enemies, explicitly wishing Dan to be "a snake by the wayside" in doing so (49:16–19). Why does a blameless man deceive his own family and instruct his sons to act like the serpent that induced our fallen state? Is man necessarily simple and crooked, vexed and blessed by his very nature?

*Yisra'el*, the name Jacob earns, clearly means "Wrestles-with-God." Two related words go into this name: *sará*, the name God gives Sarai, means "to be or become great or princely," "to wrestle or overcome" while *'el* means simply "a god" and in uncommon situations "strength" or "nothing." "Prince of God" is analogous to "Counsels of Zeus" and fits the divine judgment that Jacob has "fought with God and men and prevailed" (32:29). If one is named and then later deemed to be akin to Zeus, the other overcomes his name and asserts his right to God's kinship (Cf. 30:25–43 with 31:1–13). Jacob and Diomedes, in their opposing affinities to the divine will, paradoxically seem the most suited to contend with it directly.

### III: WILL, JUDGMENT, AND BEHAVIOR

What is the divine will for Jacob in contrast with Diomedes? Athena wishes Diomedes “should prove himself pre-eminent amid all the Argives, and win glorious renown,” giving him such inexorable strength it becomes unclear whether he is fighting with the Trojans or Argives (5.1–8, 84–94). Yahweh promises Jacob “the land on which [he] lie[s]” and his constant company, which Jacob vows to repay by making Yahweh his god only if Yahweh fulfills this promise (28:10–32). In the *Iliad*, one of many gods wishes only one of many men to have glory, while in *Genesis*, the one God of a people promises one man his people’s glory.

What is the end Diomedes and Jacob seek by fighting with the gods? Before their encounters, both men pray to their patron divinities and invoke their fathers: Diomedes seeks the same support his father Tydeus had in slaying his enemies while Jacob invokes Yahweh as the God of his forefathers to keep his promise and save him in his smallness from being slayed by his brother Esau (Cf. 5.115–120 with 32:10–13). Diomedes seems to seek a continuity of paternal renown while Jacob wishes for mere survival.

In response to his prayer, Athena communicates her will directly to Diomedes: he is granted his father’s strength and the ability to discern between gods and mortals and instructed to fight with no gods other than Aphrodite (5.124–132). Jacob on the other hand is left to his own resources, hastily splitting his camp where before he thought it would be doubled with Yahweh’s help, preparing a gift offering for his brother, using up much of the cattle he won from his uncle Laban for said gift, showing (together with the ironic turn from the double-camp of divine strength in 32:3 to the two divided camps of weakness at 32:8) that Yahweh provides in a way that Jacob cannot expect yet must act upon (32:14–22). Which of the two men is pious? Is it relevant that Diomedes was praying out of rage at receiving a wound while Jacob was praying out of fear at the overwhelming advantage of his brother’s forces (Cf. 5.111–4 with 32:4–9)?

Though Athena lends direct support, what Diomedes discerns is that Aphrodite is simply a weak goddess (5.333 ff.). In rescuing her son Aeneas, she exposes her hand to Diomedes’ spear thrust. There is no battle to speak of and she rushes off straightaway to Olympus, leaving Aeneas vulnerable except for Apollo’s protection. Although Diomedes knows what Athena instructed, Dione remarks while healing Aphrodite that he “knoweth not this, that verily he endureth not for long who

fighteth with the immortals" (5.406-409). Hence Apollo is outraged when Diomedes attempts to attack him as well, calling Ares with the same claim as Aphrodite: Diomedes would "fight even against father Zeus" (Cf. 5.362 with 457).

Ares now changes the tide of war for the Trojans and Diomedes is wounded. It is here that Hera calls upon Athena to stop Ares with the same exhortation Diomedes first used, leading to Athena's haranguing Diomedes for following her directions, as Agamemnon had for not being up to his father's standards. It seems that Athena does not reward submission or have mysterious ways as Yahweh does. Athena then drives the chariot of Diomedes and he lands a heavy blow on Ares. Zeus seemingly approves of this series of interventions because it is the "way" of each god to either oppose each other or be opposed, and Diomedes comes out unpunished.

Jacob on the other hand is alone for his encounter. He is without divine strength or allies. As opposed to the antediluvian men or Diomedes, but like Odysseus, Jacob does not now live for glory, if he ever did. He lives for more life. Now he is alone, and his trust will be put to the ultimate test in this dark night by the punning river Jabbok. Who is the man at the river Jabbok? Why does he wrestle with Jacob? The fight's narrative context suggests Jacob is wrestling with God. Yahweh's later recapitulation of the prize, the name Israel, seems to be a confirmation of his association at least with the man at the river (Cf. 32:29 with 35:10). The purpose of this fight seems to be a test of Jacob's willingness to engage with the divine rather than merely follow a plan from his mother or uncle or assume God's help. Unlike Diomedes, Jacob is injured and wins.

#### IV: REASON AND ORDER

Jacob succeeds in holding the man till dawn in spite of a dislocated thigh, an injury the man inflicted because he could not prevail (*yakol*) against Jacob (32:26). He wrestles till dawn, allowing for the first and only true combat a patriarch is shown to undergo: Jacob maintains his hold, presumably until he can see the man, and this simple dweller of tents cannot be prevailed upon. The man demands to be set free at the dawn, either for his own sake or for Jacob's. Jacob then demands a blessing in exchange for freedom. Jacob asserts his victory, his right to a blessing. The divinity asks his name, but rejects the name "Jacob" as unsuitable and says

that he will be known henceforth as Israel, “for you have fought with God and men and have prevailed” (32:28).

Immediately afterward the narrator still calls Israel “Jacob,” and Jacob asks the man his name to no avail (32:30). This ambiguity of identity is similar and in contrast with Diomedes, who was affected enough by the confrontation with Ares and the loss of discernment to ask Glaucus who he is among “human beings” or divinities (5.123). The man withholds his name but offers Jacob a blessing as farewell, and Jacob names the place Peniel or Face of God, “for I have seen God, face to face, and my life has been saved” (32:30). Limping away, Jacob instigates one of two interruptions in *Genesis* where the narrator explains that to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew on the thigh, the other interruption being the origin of matrimony (32:33). Given the uniqueness afforded to this event by the narrator, it seems likely that Jacob’s wrestling match is as significant a turning point in human history as the creation of man and woman. Jacob is then able to reconcile with his brother Esau, “for I have, after all, seen your face, as one sees the face of God, and you have been gracious to me...God has shown me favor—for I have everything” (33:10–11).

In proving himself, Jacob has successfully reconciled with his brother, though he does deceive him once more to go a different way (33:12-17), just as Diomedes’s reconciliation is only a temporary truce. Diomedes in other words recognizes common humanity as a reason to oppose mortality with glory while Jacob recognizes in common humanity the equal potential to do harm each human being has. This seems to indicate that the Israelites will no longer bear the shame of the serpent’s deceit but reclaim the serpent’s cunning, becoming the most prudent and persistent people in history.

After he parts from Esau, Jacob buys the city of Shekhem as his home, the first patriarch to settle in a city since Cain. He also demands that his family throw out their foreign gods and establishes two sites for Yahweh out of awe (or fear). Jacob is not called Israel in the narrative until after Rachel dies bearing Benjamin (35:21). At this point, Jacob with his twelve sons has begun the tribe his fathers were promised.

Diomedes, in contrast, changes the course of the Trojan War: his temporary truce shifts the focus from retributive justice to the pursuit of glory. The only time Zeus intervenes on his behalf is to take away Glaucus’ wits in the exchange of his gold for Diomedes’s bronze armor (5.234-236),

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casting an ironic shadow on the possibility of political reconciliation. Diomedes denies peace with Troy altogether, making it Troy's fate to fall and the Argive fate to triumph (7.400-402). Which way of life is the surer foundation of a nation?



Herodotus tersely describes the first Spartan success at Thermopylae. Nearly six thousand Greeks were facing two million Persians, "but [the Spartans] were making manifest to everyone, and not least to the [Persian] king himself, that there are many human beings (*ánthrōpoi*) indeed, but few men (*ándres*)." In his final speech, Moses tells his people "[the law will be] wisdom for you...in the eyes of the peoples who...will say: only a wise...people is this." In the context of their stories, Jacob and Diomedes establish tribal standards for the virtuous life. Through coming into conflict with their divinities before a mortal encounter, in a sense winning the opportunity to suffer the ultimate defeat in recognizing immortal beings as beyond reasonable communion, both of these characters reconcile to their capacities: Jacob as Israel learns exactly how wisdom begins in fear of the Lord and Diomedes learns that glory is a mortal's final hope.

Is there a larger message in these conflicting founders about reaching the limits of human experience? This ancient balancing act may be what motivated Socrates to claim a monotheistically-tinged philosophy as a divine mission. Divine reason as a constant may provide order once human reason has been exhausted, and seems to require human reason as a windmill requires the wind to incite it. Though we may never have access to the gods, we can strive to understand what human limits each of us share by sheer will. By wrestling with sacred accounts individually, we may glean some of the monumental questions provided by these fabulous encounters and be able to encounter religion more fruitfully than we could through dismissal or submission. Whether one tradition provides a better model of virtue than the other is still in need of investigation, but the turn from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey* and Plato's monotheistic tendencies seems to come closer to Jacob's turn from ruthless pursuit of earthly birthright to prudential defense of a divine promise by holding something to be above all human things.