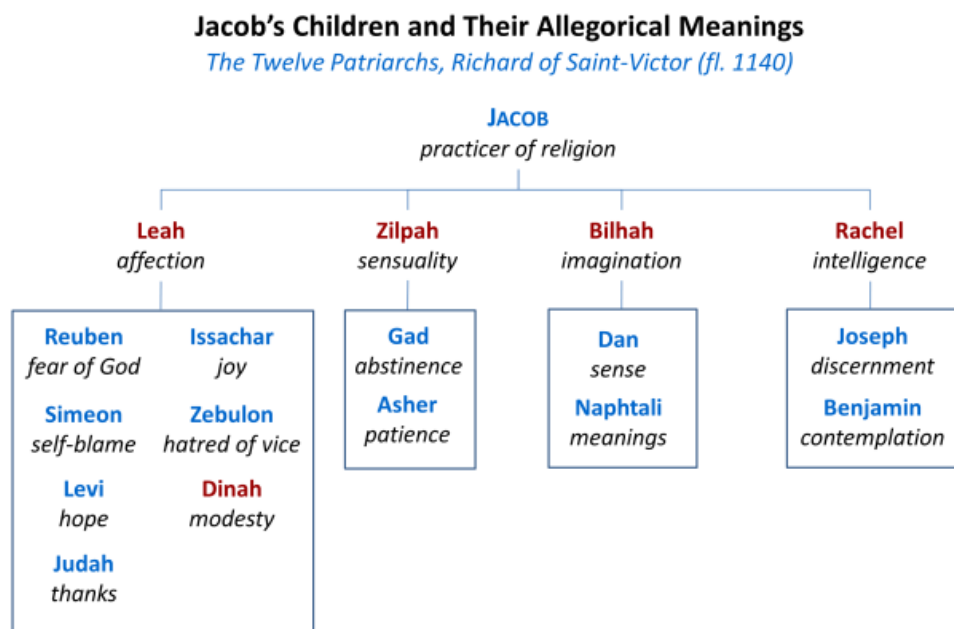


Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Richard of St. Victor: Allegorical Meaning of Jacob's Wives and Children

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GENESIS 29ff tells of the wives and children of Jacob, grandson of the patriarch Abraham. Jacob had 12 sons, from whom descended the 12 tribes of Israel. The story's details suggest that, like the rest of Genesis, it has an allegorical meaning. Richard of Saint-Victor's (fl. 1165) analysis of this, a work titled the *Twelve Patriarchs (Benjamin Minor)*, is a masterpiece of psychological allegoresis, rivaling the even seminal contributions of Philo of Alexandria to this genre.

As Genesis explains, Jacob married Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, and also their respective handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah. These four mothers bore 12 sons and one daughter. For Richard — following the long tradition established by Philo (and mediated through Origen, Ambrose and Jerome;

see Sheridan, 2012) Jacob symbolizes the 'practicer' of moral reformation and spiritual growth. That is, practice here is understood in the sense of *askesis*, namely the practical effort one makes to mature into a self-realized holy and spiritual person.

Each of Jacob's wives and children, according to Richard, symbolizes a distinct psychological disposition relevant to this journey. Leah and Rachel represent the *affective* and *intellectual* sides of our psyche or soul, and Zilpah and Bilah are *sensation* and *imagination*, which, according to Richard, serve affection and reason, respectively.

Each son and daughter is a virtuous disposition originating in our psychological nature (in effect, they are very much like Jungian archetypes, but all concerned with our moral and spiritual development). They emerge in a particular order and supply some necessary function as we proceed towards higher levels of moral integration and spiritual consciousness. This is a cyclical process, something we repeat often, perhaps even daily in our constant struggle to rise from worldly-mindedness and egoism to spiritual mindedness.

Two give two examples, Naphtali, a son of Bilah, is the disposition to uplift our soul from consideration of material things to the eternal goods these things suggest or symbolize; and Gad, a son of Zilpha, represents abstinence, or the intentional putting aside of sensual pleasures. Ultimately we arrive at the births of Joseph (discriminative self-knowledge) and Benjamin (religious contemplation).

Whether this is the original intended meaning of Genesis here or not, merely taken on its own terms Richard's exegesis supplies an insightful and valuable analysis of the psychology of the spiritual journey. It's also landmark in the history of Old Testament interpretation and deserves wider attention today.

The following excerpt concerning Joseph exemplifies quality of the entire work.



Richard of Saint-Victor. *The Twelve Patriarchs (Benjamin Minor)*, Chs. 71–72

Chapter LXXI. *Concerning the two offspring of reason, viz., grace of discretion and grace of contemplation.*

By this Joseph the soul is continually instructed and at times is led to full knowledge of itself, just as by his [full] brother Benjamin it is at times lifted up to the contemplation of God. For just as we understand grace of discretion by Joseph, so we understand grace of contemplation by Benjamin. Both are born from [Rachel] because knowledge of God and of self are learned from Reason. Benjamin is born long after Joseph because the soul that has not been practiced over a long time and educated fully in knowledge of self is not raised up to knowledge of God. In vain he raises the eye of the heart to see God when he is not yet prepared to see himself. Let a person first learn to know his own invisible things before he presumes that he is able to grasp at invisible divine things. You must know the invisible things of your own spirit before you can be capable of knowing the invisible things of God. If you are not able to know yourself, how do you have the boldness to grasp at those things which are above you?

Chapter LXXII. *How the soul is lifted up to contemplation of God by means of full knowledge of self.*

The rational soul discovers without doubt that it is the foremost and principal mirror for seeing God. For if the invisible things of God are seen, being understood by the intellect by means of those things which have been made (cf. Rom. 1:20), where, I ask, have the traces of knowledge been found more clearly imprinted than in His image? ... Whoever thirsts to see his God — let him wipe his mirror, let him cleanse his spirit. And so the true Joseph does not cease to hold, wipe and gaze into this mirror incessantly: to hold it so that it does not adhere to the earth, after it has fallen down by means of love; to wipe it so that it does not become dirty from the dust of useless thoughts; to gaze into it so that the eye of his intention does not turn toward empty pursuits. When the mirror has been wiped and gazed into for a long time, a kind of splendor of divine light begins to shine in it and a great beam of unexpected vision appears to his eyes. This light illumined the eyes of him who said: "The light of your face has been sealed upon us, Lord; you have put joy in my heart" (Ps. 4:7). Therefore, from the vision of this light that it wonders at within itself, the soul is kindled from above in a marvelous way and is animated to see the living light that is above it. I say, from this vision the soul conceives the flame of longing for the sight of God, and it lays hold of a pledge. And so the mind that now bums with longing for this vision should know that if it already hopes for what it longs for, it already has conceived Benjamin himself. By hoping the mind conceives; by longing it goes into labor; and the more longing increases, the closer it comes to giving birth. (Zinn, pp. 129–130)

Richard's sequel to this work, *The Mystical Ark (Benjamin Major)*, treats of the fruits of the ascetical process, that is, contemplation: its nature, ascending levels, and culmination in mystical union with God. That work is important both for its own sake and for its influence on St. Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God*.

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