

Jacob's Ladder

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I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

The so-called “Jacob’s ladder” is part of the dream or vision, which the patriarch Jacob has or resp. receives in Bethel (Gen 28:12–13), where he founds a sanctuary for YHWH. The term *sullām* mentioned in the Hebrew text, designates, however, rather a stairway. Only the later versions (LXX *κλίμαξ*; Vg. *scala*) interpreted the object as a ladder, and this interpretation determined the ensuing reception history.

In Jacob’s dream, the stairway stands on the earth and reaches up to heaven, has messengers going up and down and YHWH standing at the top. The stairway can thus be understood as a connection between the earth and the heavenly sphere. Thus, the story in Gen 28 establishes Bethel, the place of the important Northern Israelite sanctuary, as a place of holiness and closeness to God.

The idea of such a stairway to heaven is also known in extra-biblical sources. The Babylonian myth “Nergal and Ereshkigal” mentions a stairway between the underworld and heaven, on which heavenly beings go up and down (Millard). The Egyptian Pyramid texts refer to a stairway, on which the deceased Pharaoh ascends to heaven (Griffith). It is disputed, if also the step-like form of the Mesopotamian ziggurat temples is the basis for the vision in Gen 28 (Hurowitz). However, such temples were not common in Israel. Nonetheless, since the stairway in Gen 28 is connected to the foundation of a sanctuary, it is at least imaginable

that knowledge of Mesopotamian ziggurat temples influenced the portrayal of Bethel and its sanctuary so as to make it appear like the place of a stairway to heaven.

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Jakob Wöhrle

II. Judaism

■ Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism ■ Rabbinic Judaism ■ Medieval Judaism

A. Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism

The most prominent example of the reception of Jacob’s ladder in Hellenistic Jewish literature is the pseudepigraphic *Ladder of Jacob*. It is preserved mostly in medieval Slavonic, in two main distinct recensions (R and S) of five and seven chapters respectively (according to Lunt’s arrangement in translation), among several manuscripts of the collection *Tolkovaia Palaia* (Explanatory Palaia). It was probably translated from Greek, perhaps from a Second Temple Hebrew or Aramaic original, as indicated by transcribed Hebrew words in the text (Kugel 1995: 210–11). A portion in Hebrew, perhaps itself translated from Greek (Leicht: 169), containing the prayer of Jacob for a message from God in a dream, was discovered in the Cairo Geniza and recently published in 1997.

The *Ladder of Jacob* recounts the story of Jacob fleeing to Laban and his dream about the ladder in more detail than the biblical account (Gen 28). The first chapter contains Jacob’s dream in which he sees a ladder with twelve steps with two faces or busts (statues) of kings on each rung and a human face carved out of fire at the top. (As to whether the face is God’s face or a heavenly counterpart of Jacob, see Orlov 2007b). Above that face, God speaks to Jacob about the promised land and blessings upon Jacob’s descendants. In the second chapter, Jacob prays to God for the dream to be interpreted. In the third and fourth chapters, the archangel Sariel comes to Jacob, interprets the dream, and changes his name to Israel (cf. Gen 32 – Jacob’s wrestling with an angel who changes his name). In the last three chapters, Sariel indicates that the ladder refers to this age, the twelve steps refer to the periods of this age, and the statues refer to godless Gentile rulers, who, because of their wickedness, will persecute, exile, and enslave Jacob’s descendants in the future. The angel indicates that in that place or land of Jacob’s dream a temple will be built in the

name of his God, but due to the sins of his offspring, foreign kings will make it deserted by four ascents of this age (1:1–6; 5:1–9, 16). These four ascents, or descents, may refer to the four empires mentioned in Dan 3 and 7, which are also referred to in later Jewish writings of the time. This may be confirmed by Sariel mentioning the delivering of Jacob's descendants into the hands of the descendants of Esau (5:12–13), who are associated in other contemporary writings with Daniel's fourth empire, the Roman Empire (4 Ezra 12:11–36), which "may ultimately derive from the association of the Idumean (that is, Edomite) King Herod with Rome" (Kugel 1995: 214). However, Kugel (*ibid.*: 224) prefers to view Edom, who will ultimately perish along with Moab (6:15), here only in an eschatological sense.

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B. Rabbinic Judaism

The rabbis interpret Jacob's ladder as a typological representation of Jewish history and sacred geography, though they offer a range of explanations as to exactly what the dream prefigures.

R. Samuel b. Naḥman explained that the angels were the four guardian angels of the nations of the world: Babylon, Media, Greece, and Edom/Rome. Their actions represented the strength and dominion of each empire on earth. The guardian angels of Babylon, Media, and Greece all climbed a number of rungs before stopping, but the guardian angel of Rome/Edom climbed and climbed until he was so high up that he was invisible from earth. Jacob became afraid, but God promised Jacob that Rome/Edom too would eventually stop and fall. Alternatively, God showed Jacob the nation's guard-

ian angels ascending and descending, and then promised Jacob that he too would have a nation, but that his would ascend forever. Jacob doubted God's promise, and as a result of his doubt, his children were destined to be subjugated by the four empires, until their eventual redemption (*WayR* 29:2).

According to a different rabbinic tradition, the dream was intended to inform the righteous Jacob that he would always be accompanied by two angels wherever he went. The ascending angels were those who accompanied Jacob in the land of Israel, and the descending angels escorted him outside the land (*BerR* 68:12).

Another rabbinic interpretation saw the ladder as a symbol of Mount Sinai, and the angels ascending and descending as representing Moses and Aaron, mediating between Israel and God. This interpretation was based in part on the numerical equivalency of the Hebrew word Sinai with the Hebrew word *sullam* (ladder), and aligned with a belief that the site of Jacob's ladder was Mount Moriah. Yet another interpretation was proposed by R. Yose bar Ḥalaftha, who understood the base of the ladder to be the high altar in the temple in Jerusalem, the ladder itself to be the animals sacrificed thereon, the top of the ladder to be the smoke from the altar ascending to heaven, and the angels to be the high priests who mediate between Israel and God through sacrifice (*BerR* 68:12). Schwartz has argued that these rabbinic interpretations were meant to transfer ancient evidence of the cult at Bethel to the heavens and to Jerusalem (1985: 81–83). This process continues in the later rabbinic *Pirqei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*, which associates the location of Jacob's dream with both the site of the temple and the nave of the world.

The Babylonian Talmud records a tradition that the ladder was eight thousand parasangs wide, wide enough that, if angels are two thousand parasangs wide, two angels ascending and two descending could stand on the same rung (*bHul* 91b). According to this tradition, the angels were ascending and descending in order to compare the likeness of Jacob on God's throne above with the face of the actual man below.

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Sara Ronis

C. Medieval Judaism

During the Middle Ages, Jewish exegetes, philosophers, and mystics produced a variety of readings of Jacob's dream about the ladder. Building on rabbinic explications, medieval Jewish sages read the biblical text in diverse ways in light of and in response to their own ideas and concerns. The following brief survey of medieval Jewish interpretations

of Jacob's ladder will present the main trends of Jewish exegesis chronologically, including the Karaites, Spanish *peshat*, the Maimonidean tradition, the kabbalistic tradition, ending with the exegetical and homiletical literature of the 14th and 15th centuries.

1. The Karaites. As is now generally accepted among scholars, the Karaites – an anti-rabbinic scripturalist movement – were the first to develop a proper commentary tradition in Judaism. During the 10th and 11th centuries, considered the golden age of Karaism, Karaite sages produced a very large corpus of writings about and related to the Bible, including at least six commentaries on Genesis. These commentaries tended to reject rabbinic midrashic readings of the Bible in favor of more contextualized readings grounded in grammar and narrative order. The commentary by Yefet b. Eli – the most prolific and influential exegete in the tradition – is a good example. He critically surveys several explanations of Jacob's dream by the "religious scholars" – Yefet's standard term for the rabbinic sages – then presents his own preferred reading, which is that Jacob's dream gives a description of the mechanics of prayer. The angels ascending and descending relate to the ascension of prayers and petitions to God and the descent of God's response. This is the reading Jacob himself hinted at, Yefet maintains, when he says, upon waking from the dream: "This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17).

2. Spanish *Peshat*. The grammatical and contextual approach to Scripture was developed in rabbinic circles as well, especially in Islamic Spain (Andalusia) between 950–1150 CE. The Spanish Jewish sages of the period were interested in reading the Bible in light of philosophy as well, especially the current trend of Neoplatonism. One good example of the philosophical approach is the interpretation of Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021–1058) cited by Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) in his commentary on Gen 28:12: "Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol ha-Sefaradi says that Jacob's ladder alludes to man's heavenly soul, and that the angels of God signify thoughts of wisdom."

Ibn Ezra himself rejects this allegorical reading of Jacob's dream. He rejects the interpretation of the Karaite Yeshu'ah b. Judah as well, which is identical to Yefet's cited above. Typical of his exegesis as a whole, Ibn Ezra prefers a complex reading that draws from both grammar and philosophy. As he states it, "the correct way to interpret Jacob's dream is to consider it a parable. It teaches that nothing is hidden from God and that what happens below is contingent on the decree from above. There is thus, as it were, a ladder linking heaven and earth by which angels ascend to inform God what they have seen on earth after going over it. Scripture also states that other angels come down

to fulfill God's commands. The imagery presented is that of a king and his servant."

3. The Maimonidean Tradition. A turning point in the history of exegesis, as in so many areas, came with the work of Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), whose *Guide of the Perplexed* presented a method and model for the philosophical and allegorical explication of Scripture. In the *Guide*, moreover, Jacob's ladder plays a key role. It is cited already in the preface to part 1, as an example of a biblical "parable" in which every term has significance, and he develops two distinct readings in different chapters throughout his work, one cosmological – the ladder is the cosmos extending from the earth to God, the first cause – the other political, focusing on the angels ascending and descending. As Maimonides explains in *Guide* 1.15, the angels are prophets who ascend to God then return to govern the community armed with their mastery of divine wisdom.

These two readings, cosmological and political, were especially fruitful in the later Jewish philosophical exegetical culture. In fact Jacob's ladder became a primary site for the development of philosophical ideas within Judaism. One good example is Samuel ibn Tibbon (ca. 1165–1232), the translator of the *Guide* into Hebrew and one of Maimonides' first disciples. Ibn Tibbon filled out Maimonides' explication by identifying the ladder with the Aristotelian curriculum, which the philosopher masters in his ascent toward knowledge of metaphysics. Ibn Tibbon put special focus on one ambiguity in the text as well: "And behold, the Lord stood over or above it ('*alaw*,' Gen 28:13). Does this mean that God stood on the ladder or above the ladder? Can one ascend the ladder and know God through natural progression or does one need extra assistance to move beyond the ladder, from physics and cosmology to metaphysics? This pictorial representation of the gap between God and the world would become a central topos in later readings of Gen 28:12–13 and in later debates more generally about the merits of philosophy vs. prophecy.

4. The Kabbalistic Tradition. There is another way to read the ambiguous '*alaw*' in Gen 28:13: "And behold, the Lord stood upon him [i.e., Jacob]." The rabbinic sages already identified this reading of the verse, referring to "the image of Jacob engraved upon the Throne of Glory" (see *BerR* 68:18). In the Middle Ages, it was this reading that was preferred by the kabbalists, as found developed fully and systematically in the work of Bahya ben Asher (1255–1340), a later figure in the school of Nahmanides who wrote a commentary on the Torah using several methods of interpretation, roughly equivalent to the methods alluded to in the acronym *pardes*. Depending on the verse Bahya gives one to several interpretations, based on *peshat*, rabbinic midrash, philosophical allegory, and mysticism. His kabbalistic explanation at Gen 28:13 is

presented esoterically in relation to the sefirotic system. The ladder is itself the sefirotic tree while Jacob is identical with the *sefirah tif'eret*. Thus Jacob being engraved on the Throne of Glory refers to his position as the central axis in the sefirotic emanation of the divine essence.

5. The 14th Century. The 14th century was a period of consolidation in the history of Jewish exegesis and innovation in the forms it took. It begins a golden age in the development of the Jewish sermon. The most creative exegesis of the time was found not in commentaries but in sermons, and then moved from sermons to proper commentaries – not the other way around. A good example of this is the sermons of R. Nissim b. Reuben Gerondi (of Gerona; called Ran; 1320–1376) and the commentary produced by his student Joseph b. David of Saragossa. In sermon five of *Derashot ha-Ran*, Nissim presents an original reading of Jacob's ladder which reappears almost verbatim in his student's commentary. The angels ascending and descending, Ran explains, represent the human soul, which has two faces. When focusing on religion, philosophy, and spiritual pursuits the soul is facing upward, toward God at the top of the ladder, but when engaged in the material life, in eating, drinking, and reproduction, the soul is facing downward toward the earth. The idea of the two faces of the soul is itself Avicennian and was especially popular in the Franciscan philosophical tradition contemporary with Ran. Through his use of it in a sermon and its reproduction in his student's biblical commentary, it entered into the mainstream of Jewish thought and exegesis.

6. The 15th Century. The Jewish sermon continued to flourish in the 15th century, as did the trend toward collection and consolidation in biblical commentaries. Especially in Spain, the 15th century also witnessed the emergence of a very conservative trend in Jewish thought and exegesis. A good example of all these developments can be found in the writings of Isaac Arama (ca. 1420–1494) and Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508). Arama, in Gate 25 of his *'Aqedat Yitshaq*, develops a very long polemic against philosophy which plays out through his reading of Jacob's ladder. Framing his discussion with a mid-rashic text that had not been cited in previous commentaries, he argues that what Jacob really saw in his dream was the limitations of reason. Arama, in other words, puts emphasis on God *above* the ladder, who can only be reached through prophecy. A similar conclusion is drawn by Abarbanel in his exhaustive survey of possible readings of the ladder in his commentary on Gen 28:10–22. In Abarbanel's opinion, the tradition introduced by Maimonides is faulty by nature, for Jacob's dream was without question a prophetic dream; it could not have been a philosophical dream yielding theoretical knowledge of the cosmos, for, as the philosophers them-

selves maintain, theoretical wisdom can be acquired by reasoning only, not through the processes of the imagination which govern dreaming.

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III. Christianity

- Greek and Latin Patristics and Early Medieval Times
- Medieval Times and Reformation Era ■ Modern Europe and America

A. Greek and Latin Patristics and Early Medieval Times

The patriarch Jacob dreams of a ladder between heaven and earth whereon angelic beings ascend and descend (Gen 28:11–18). Early Christian spiritual interpretation of the story draws on its treatment by Philo, which integrates Platonic ascent and descent themes. Origen comments Philo's study of the passage (probably from *On Dreams*) as "worthy of intelligent study by those who wish to find the truth." He then suggests that Moses was perhaps hinting at truths of Platonic doctrine (*Cels.* 6.21). Jerome reports that Origen used Jacob's ladder to teach about the fall of souls; it pictured the way "rational creatures descend gradually to the lowest step, namely, to flesh and blood" (*Jo. Hier.* 19).

Christological readings begin with Justin (*Dial.* 86.2–3) and Irenaeus (*Epid.* 45). For Tertullian the ladder shows the way to God's salvation; he writes that Jacob's exclamation after his dream – "This is the house of God, the gate of heaven!" – points to Christ who is "the temple of God and the gate of heaven" (*Marc.* 3.25; cf. John 10:9). Augustine's thoroughly christological reading in *Faust.* 12.26 leads to themes of conversion. For Augustine, Christ the God-man authorized this line of interpretation quite plainly (*apertissime*) by casting himself as the ladder of Jacob: "You will see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of

Man" (John 1:51). Thus Christ "is the ladder reaching from earth to heaven and stretching from the flesh to the spirit, because by progressing or ascending in him the fleshly-minded become spiritually-minded.... We also understand him to be the ladder because he said, 'I am the way' (John 14:6)." The "angels," etymologically "messengers," signify Christian preachers of the gospel: who "ascend the ladder" of anagogic ecstasy to contemplate the glory of the divine Word (John 1:1), but then accommodate their spiritual wisdom to earthbound minds by preaching the human Christ who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Christ is both the destination to which preachers bring their hearers (*ad illum*), and the means by which they bring them there (*per illum*; cf. *Serm.* 123.3.3). Their model is Paul: "compelled by the love of Christ" to speak in both ecstasy and restraint (2 Cor 5:14), they ascend to "speak wisdom among the perfect" (1 Cor 2:6), and descend "to feed little ones with milk, not solid food" (1 Cor 3:2).

Cassiodorus uses the story to commend the work of learning how to read Scripture by studying the exegesis of the fathers: "Let us climb to divine scripture through the worthy expositions of the Fathers.... Possibly that is Jacob's ladder on which the angels go up and down" (*Inst.* 1 praef. 2). Among John Damascene's types of Mary, the ladder of Jacob is a special image for teaching Mary's "assumption" according to the rationale of the incarnation (*Nat.* 3; *Dorm.* 1.8; 3.2). All along the "noetic and living" ladder of incarnational salvation, Mary climbs to the heavenly Jerusalem, the "church of the first-born" (Heb 12:23), leaving her tomb to become a new "tabernacle" (*Dorm.* 3.2).

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B. Medieval Times and Reformation Era

In the Middle Ages, Jacob's ladder was given a variety of symbolic interpretations. For Gregory the Great, it signified mystical contemplation of God; for the author of the *Benedictine Rule* (7.13), its rungs were obedience and humility leading to perfect charity (Gen 28:10–19); for Hrabanus Maurus, it represented charity (*Allegoriae in Scripturam Sacram*); for Nicholas of Lyra its rungs represented the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:1–17), and its ascent the devotion of praying saints (*Postilla ad Genesis* 28.12–14); for Alan of Lille, its rungs represented the seven stages of spiritual progress towards perfect faith: confession, prayer, thanksgiving, study of Scripture, the learning of exegesis, scriptural interpretation, and preaching (*Ars praedicandi*, preface). A simi-

lar progression, of devotion to God, was described by Bonaventure (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, preface) and Walter Hilton (*The Ladder of Perfection*). The ladder was used by medieval preachers as a way of linking heaven and earth, and as a symbol of the connection between their audience and God. This was made explicit at St Martin's Church in Tours, which depicted Jacob's ladder over the arch of the apse, marking it as the entrance to heaven within an earthly church. Similarly, in the *Glossa Ordinaria* the ascending angels are interpreted as attending God, and the descending angels as attending humanity. Generally, therefore, Jacob's ladder represented spiritual growth and progress. It was a key theme of symbolic art in manuscripts and architecture throughout the Middle Ages.

Protestant reformers interpreted Jacob's ladder as Christ, the cross, or the incarnation, after Augustine (*Faust.* 12.25; *Serm.* 79; 89.5; 122.2), who based his reading on Jesus' words at Nathanael's confession in John 1:47–51. This was the interpretation of Martin Luther (*Lectures on Genesis* 26–30) and John Calvin (*Comm. Gen.* 2.28). Cornelius à Lapide (*Comm. Gen.* 28.286–9) saw the ladder allegorically as the cross, and topologically as the human spirit. In Reformation theology, therefore, Jacob's ladder continued to represent moral and spiritual aspiration, and its rungs the necessary virtues, but the concomitant focus on God was more expressly stated than in the Middle Ages.

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C. Modern Europe and America

The interpretive traditions of the past were further developed in modern times. Jacob's ladder is then referred to as *scala paradisi*, *Himmelstreppe*, *échelle spirituelle*, and similar terms. Among the literary adaptations of the motif, distinctions can be made between references to the mystical ascent of the soul to God, the praying person's contemplative practice on a path towards joyful devotion, the ethical perfecting of human beings aiming for absolute virtue, and the pastoral counseling of fatally ill persons understood as leading upwards towards a blessed death. These different aspects of the motif can appear overlapped or blended together. Other adaptations refer to God's descent and self-humiliation in Jesus Christ, hence defining "downwards" as the only appropriate direction of the ladder for the encounter between God and humans, expressly rejecting the upwards-leading multi-stage models mentioned above.

1. Orthodoxy. In Orthodoxy, the enormous impact of John Climacus' Κλίμαξ was only fully felt in modern times (Müller: 406). This is particularly true for hesychasm (the practice of the stillness of the soul), which John had recommended as the twenty-seventh rung of his Κλίμαξ. In *The Way of a Pilgrim* (1870/1911), this contemplative practice was expanded to include laypeople: here, the incessant repetition of the Jesus prayer or prayer of the heart plays a crucial role. Philaret, the hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, declared in Boston in 1975:

Saint John wrote his immortal work especially for the monastics, but in the past his *Ladder* was always favorite reading in Russia for anyone zealous to live piously, though he were not a monk. Therein the Saint clearly demonstrates how a man passes from one step to the next. Remember, Christian soul, that this ascent on high is indispensable for anyone who wishes to save his soul unto eternity. (John Climacus 1978: xxxi)

The work has also been appropriated by Catholics as well. For example, a German version explicitly intended for use as a tool of exorcism and as a weapon in the confessional struggle against the evil spirits of rationalism and revolution was published in 1834 by the Bavarian state university of Landshut (John Climacus 1834: v–xxiv).

2. Catholicism. Catholicism has many examples of Western interpretive traditions of Jacob's ladder. The motif occurs frequently in modern European mysticism – particularly in French mysticism (cf. the abundant evidence provided by Bertaud/Rayez). Henri Brémond even titled the unpublished introduction of his *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (1915) with *L'échelle mystique*, as if mysticism could best be identified by the ladder motif. In 1898, the Carmelite nun Thérèse of Lisieux explicitly rejected any interpretation that promoted a piety of achievement, choosing instead to modernize the heavenly ladder in a humorous way: she, Thérèse, was much too small to climb up the arduous steps to perfection,

but I wish to look for the means to go to heaven by an entirely new little way. We're in a century of inventions (mais je veux chercher le moyen d'aller au ciel par une petite voie toute nouvelle. Nous sommes dans un siècle d'inventions)

– the rich were now making use of an elevator to reach upper levels. The mystic nun perceived Jesus as being her “divine elevator” (*ascenseur divin*), who sought (on the loose basis of Prov 9:4–5; Isa 66:12b–13a) to elevate the weak and simple-hearted to his lap and embrace them in his arms (Thérèse: 148). The traditional allegories of Jacob's ladder have been preserved and partially modernized in recent Catholicism, but they are not necessarily connected anymore to the realm of spiritual contemplation. The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff conceives Jacob's ladder to be the ideal image

of the church inasmuch as it “represents both God and man, being the sacrament of unity between God and human beings” which must be firmly planted in the world (Boff: 33).

3. Protestantism. Protestant theologians emphasize the inability of Christians to take active steps that lead to salvation or God. Accordingly, Protestant interpreters have frowned upon this use of the motif, preferring other traditional conceptions. In 1611, Johann Gerhard used Bonaventure's typological interpretation: *Scala fracta in Adamo reparata est per Christum* (Gerhard: 376: the ladder that was broken in/by Adam has been repaired by Christ). Johann Arndt may have integrated medieval mystical traditions in his *True Christianity* of 1610, however, he relativized them ostentatiously by referring to the Lutheran *Book of Concord*. Arndt employs the ladder motif as a step-by-step practice of prayer leading to union with God. Inspired by Guigo II's *Scala claustralium*, Arndt prescribes the following steps in *The Garden of Paradise* (1612): heartfelt repentance in contrition and sorrow; regeneration and the plea for Christian virtue; prayer with loud sighs; prayer with great joy; prayer out of blazing love. In this way, the person praying appropriates step by step, through meditation, the treasure of grace already bestowed by God, thus attaining bliss in God. Moreover, in *True Christianity* and in his *Postil* Arndt offers a christological interpretation:

Die Leiter ist Christus / und sein heiliger Name / die aufsteigenden Engel sind das gläubige Gebet / die absteigende sind der Trost. (Braw: 24; slightly differently: Arndt: 7–8)

(The ladder is Christ / and his holy name / the ascending angels are faithful prayer / the descending ones are solace)

This is depicted very vividly on the frontispiece of the widely distributed devotional booklet *Geistliche Himmels-Leiter* (first published in 1682; Spiritual heavenly ladder), heavily based on Arndt (see fig. 9): ascending prayer is portrayed on the left side, descending blessing on the right side in the form of individual qualities. Against this backdrop, every church interior becomes a virtual Bethel for Sigmund von Birken (62–65):

Wie heilig ist die Stätte / da ich steh.
Mit Jacob ich die Himmels-Leiter seh /
die auf und ab / Herr / deine Engel leitet /
die mir zu dir die Pforte zubereitet. ...
So ist dan diß ein BethEl / Gottes Haus
da GOtt und wir die Bothen senden aus.
Dort sein Gebot / hier mein Gebet / abgehet.
Hier Gottes Hof / der Himmel / offen stehet.
Hier JESus steht / der Erd und Himmel rührt /
die Menschen auf- und Gott herunter führt.

(How holy is the place on which I stand. | With Jacob I behold the heavenly ladder | which leads thy angels, Lord, upwards and downwards | which presents to me the gateway to Thee. ... | This is therefore a BethEl,

Fig. 9 [Arndt, J.], "Geistliche Himmelsleiter"

God's house | from whence God and we send out the heralds. | From thence his commandment, from hence my prayer goes forth. | Here God's court, heaven, stands open. | Here stands Jesus, who touches earth and heaven | who conducts humans upwards and God downwards.)

Further adaptations of Arndt's multi-stage model and transformations of the medieval *Scala claustralium/Scala paradisi* demonstrate that the ladder motif was very welcome in the devotional literature of Pietism, although Pietistic mysticism usually preferred bride-of-Christ metaphors (cf. Zinzendorf's criticism of the multi-stage model; Beyreuther: 270–71). The Pietist Caspar Calvör also embraced the model of the medieval *Scala claustralium/paradisi* for his own "devotional ladder" in 1691 (Knoke: 205), which for the sake of catechetical practice included the following steps: contemplation – examination – prayer – practice. This booklet, in turn, served as a *Vorlage* for the Bavarian revivalist theologian Wilhelm Löhe: in 1843 – in the context of a program aiming to revive Lutheran prayer life – Löhe recommended the contemplative "heavenly ladder" or "devotional ladder" in order to practice, step-by-step, the sincere "prayer of the heart" (Löhe 1951: 94–95; 1958: 71, 73). Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, who was also influenced by the German revival movement, established in 1873/74 a home for people with epilepsy near Bielefeld, Germany, which he named Bethel – in the expectation that "the heavenly ladder [will] certainly not be lacking, neither will the angels of God who escort the companions of the Cross to the right house of God" (Gerhardt: 26). From this location, the gateway to heaven was to stand open for the sick. Bethel was to be the place from which they could be "released into the home above – that is, by way of the cemetery of this institution" (Benad: 42). The cemetery is located at the ground's highest point of elevation. A cross also stands there to emphasize the direct connection to heaven. Today, Bethel is one of the biggest social service institutions in Europe and its name has come to include the entire town surrounding it.

In more recent Lutheranism, Jacob's ladder plays a central role in Anders Nygren's claim that Luther's doctrine of justification also meant a rupture with the "multi-staged" mysticism of the Middle Ages: the Reformation did away with the fateful amalgamation of Eros and Agape, clearly giving prominence once again to God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ:

God has not willed us to raise a ladder in order to come up to him; He Himself has prepared the ladder and come down to us. ... In Christ, God has come to meet us; Christ is the heavenly ladder and the "Way" furnished by God. (Nygren: 489)

The Anglican theologian Alister McGrath has repeatedly appropriated this figure of thought in recent times, interpreting Jacob's ladder precisely in

terms of how God, motivated by divine love for humanity, descends to and approaches human beings in Jesus Christ:

Christianity does not teach that man has to climb a ladder into heaven in order to find God and be with him, rather, it teaches that God has come down that ladder in order to meet us and take us back to him. We don't have to become like God before we can encounter him because God became like us first. God meets us right where we are, without preconditions. (McGrath: 76)

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Tim Lorentzen

IV. Literature

References to Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:12) appear in literary works from Dante to Kim Stanley Robinson, sometimes explicitly, sometimes tenuously. In non-fiction literature it is found as an image for progress, social ascent, or overcoming difficulties (e.g., J. Weintraub's *Jacob's Ladder: From the Bottom of the Warsaw Ghetto to the Top of New York's Art World*). It appears in titles of many (self- or micro-published) works of fiction: e.g., D.F. McKay's *Jacob's Ladder* (2013), a Dan Brown-style Vatican thriller, or

Pauline Hunter Blair's novel of the same title (2003), about a village whose inhabitants are oddly ladder-obsessed.

The biblical Jacob's dream of the ladder is referenced explicitly in Dante's *Divine Comedy* (14th cent.): the very ladder Jacob dreamed of reaches up to the final sphere, but cannot be climbed by humans and its top remains hidden (*Paradiso* 22.67–72).

In Richard Beer-Hofmann's drama *Jaákobs Traum* (Jacob's dream; part of the cycle of plays *Die Historie von König David*, 1920, The history of King David): a winged Gabriel appears on shining steps, joined later by Raphael, Uriel, Michael, and Samael (121–24). Beer-Hofmann links Jacob's dream to Jacob's wrestling the angel (Gen 32:24–31), advancing his interpretative discussion of what it means for Israel to be YHWH's "chosen" people (Schmidinger: 33–34, 109–10).

The ladder is referenced several times in Thomas Mann's *Joseph und seine Brüder* (1926–43, *Joseph and His Brothers*; e.g., Mann: 5: 1782; 4: 401), where it is called "Nabelband von Himmel und Erde" (umbilical cord of heaven and earth; Mann: 4: 140; Lohmeier).

In Harry Mulisch's *The Discovery of Heaven* (*Het ontdekking van de hemel*, 1992), a guide who is giving protagonist Onno a tour of the Dome of the Rock mentions Jacob's dream of the ladder in his summary of the significance of the location. Throughout this novel, heaven appears in protagonists' dreams as a surreal construction of stairs and ladders similar to Piranesi's *Carceri* etchings.

Douglas Rushkoff's graphic novel *Testament* (2007) includes an illustration of Jacob's dream of the ladder in the chapter "Jake's Ladder" at a decisive moment in a character's development toward becoming the leader of a dissent movement in a dystopian society.

Other works employ briefer allusions to the ladder in contexts other than direct references to or retellings of the biblical story.

In *Paradise Lost* (3.510–15), Milton references a ladder when Satan tours earth and heaven. Milton's is not a static ladder or staircase:

Each Stair was mysteriously meant, nor stood
There always, but drawn up to Heav'n some-
times. (3.516–17)

While in Milton figures from the realms of heaven and hell use the stairway, in works by Hawthorne and Melville staircases used by human protagonists are compared explicitly to Jacob's ladder.

In Herman Melville's short story "The Two Temples" (written in the 1854, published posthumously; Dillingham: 104) the protagonist climbs the tower of a church after having been refused entry into an over-crowded service and refers to the spiral staircase as Jacob's ladder.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), protagonist Miriam ascends a palatial staircase, "which, for the loftiness of its aspiration, was worthy to be Jacob's ladder, or, at all events, the staircase of the Tower of Babel" (43).

The ladder appears as a metaphor for progress in John Dryden's poem "The Hind and the Panther" (1687), where each step progresses logically from its forebear (2.216–21).

The ladder represents regress rather than progress in George Bernard Shaw's collection of plays *Back to Methusaleh* (1918–1920): cleric Franklyn uses the image of a fall down a flight of stairs – from eternal life in paradise, to the invention of murder in the story of Cain and Abel:

I ask you to contemplate our fathers as they came crashing down all the steps of this Jacob's ladder that reached from paradise to a hell on earth. (Shaw: 134)

Denise Levertov also employs the ladder as a symbol for progress in her poem "The Jacob's Ladder" (1961), found in her collection of poetry of the same title. Here, the ladder is used by humans and angels, but descending and ascending is difficult for both; the angels must use their wings to descend the large stairs, and humans exert themselves, ascending on hands and knees.

Women addressees of poems are placed on metaphorical Jacob's ladders. Ben Jonson references the ladder in the series of poems "Eupheme," constructing the subject of the poem, Lady Venetia Digby, as angelically ascending to heaven (poem 1, "The Dedication of her Cradle," first printed 1640). A similar use occurs in William Blake's poem "To My Dear Friend, Mrs Anna Flaxman" (1800) in which the ladder is described as leading up to the lyrical I's door (i.e., heaven?). Thomas Carlyle's satirical novel *Sartor Resartus* (1836) mentions Jacob's ladder, when the protagonist compares women to angels and "mysterious priestesses, in whose hand was the invisible Jacob's ladder" (bk. 2, ch. 5).

The ladder is found in visions of nature. In William Wordsworth's poem "Humanity" (1829) Jacob's ladder is mentioned (2.27–40) in a vision of peaceful, nurturing nature. In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Evangeline* (1847), vines are compared to Jacob's ladder:

on whose pendulous stairs the angels ascending,
descending,
Were the swift humming-birds, that flitted
from blossom to blossom. (2.822–23)

The ladder or stairway to heaven has – arguably – recently morphed into an elevator or escalator. Many works of science fiction feature space elevators, making it possible for humans to reach easily the quasi-metaphysical realm of "space" (rather than "heaven"). The Christian notion of human access to heaven via the stairway enabled by Jesus (Augustine) might be a tenuous motivic family resemblance. Literary works which feature space elevators

are, e.g., Arthur C. Clarke's *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979) or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* trilogy (1993–96).

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Frauke Uhlenbruch

V. Visual Arts

Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:10–22) is widely represented in Christian art, but numerous Jewish works visualize the subject as well. As early as Dura Europos (245–56 CE), Jacob's ladder is depicted with two unwinged messengers of God. In the *Golden Haggadah* (second quarter of the 14th cent., London, British Library, MS Add. 27210, fol. 4v), we find a unique representation of two heads appearing at the end of the ladder to heaven, probably to avoid the problem of representing God. In the modern era, Marc Chagall also frequently depicted Jacob's ladder (1932, Ida Chagall, Paris; 1960–66, Musee Nationale Marc Chagall, Nizza; 1970, Fraumünster, Zurich), using the image to form a connection between heaven and earth and grouping several angels around it.

The oldest surviving Christian representation is found in the Via Latina Catacomb (second quarter of the 4th cent., Rome). Here, Jacob is depicted as awake, presumably indicating that the ladder is a vision rather than a dream. In the Ashburnham-Pentateuch (6th/7th cent., Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS nouv. acq. lat. 2334, fol. 25), there is a figure at the end of the ladder, which can be interpreted either as a representation of God or of Christ.

The subject is not as common in Byzantine art as it is in Western art, but, for example, it is found in the illuminated cycles of the Octateuch. In Western medieval art, Jacob's ladder is shown in several illuminated manuscripts (Aelfric Paraphrase, 1025–50, London, British Library MS Cotton Claudius B.

IV, fol. 19r; Mosa Psalter Fragment, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, 1160/70; Millstatt Genesis, ca. 1200, Klagenfurt, Kärntner Landesarchiv Cod. GV 6/19, fol. 37v). One often finds typological and allegorical themes in these representations, and they have various interpretations. Two basic types can be distinguished: typological representations (which relate to Christ and the church) and tropological interpretations, which emphasize the (moral) ascent of man to God and the descent of God into salvation history (Kaufmann: 88). Typologically, Jacob's ladder and Jacob's dream are construed as symbols of the cross or the ascension of Christ. The stone on which Jacob sleeps and which he later anoints is found in representations with eucharistic references. Additionally, Jacob's sleeping on the stone is set in relationship with John's resting on Jesus' shoulder at the Last Supper, an event which is also prefigured by Jacob's dream and ladder. The Lambeth Bible makes the eucharistic interpretation especially clear (mid-12th cent., London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3, fol. 6). Here, Abraham's encounter with the three men and his subsequent hospitality are shown in the upper frame of the picture. On the right, one sees the sacrifice of Isaac; but Jacob's ladder and Jacob's dream, as well as the anointing of the stone are foregrounded. The center is dominated by a medallion in which God is represented with a banner (Gen 31:13; Kaufmann: 102–104). The picture thus combines several OT scenes, all of which set the Eucharist and altar in typological relationship.

When symbolic of a connection of transcendence and immanence, in which the human being ascends to God, Jacob's ladder has stronger tropological interpretations. Three aspects of this ascent are particularly significant: the ascent through insight/knowledge, virtue, and humility (Kaufmann: 136). The latter was especially popular in the monastic traditions of Benedict of Nursia and Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard's treatise, *Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* (middle of the 12th cent.), depicts the ladder to heaven as an entry and combines it with the image of Benedict's climb up the twelve steps of humility, which parallel the twelve steps of pride (associated with descent). In the lower edge of the picture, a sleeping Jacob is depicted, and, at the top, Christ is flanked by two monks, Benedict and Bernard (Kaufmann: 169–71).

From the 14th century on, allegory became less important. Jacob's dream and ladder were increasingly depicted as a subjective phenomenon or as an inner vision. Instead of a ladder, Jacob's vision was often depicted as stairs, which disappeared into the bright light and clouds of heaven (Raffael, ca. 1515–18, Loggia, Vatican Museum, Rome; Domenico Fetti, ca. 1620, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; William Blake, ca. 1805, British Museum, London). Some images completely omitted steps and ladder

(Jusepe de Ribera, 1639, Museo del Prado, Madrid; Arent de Gelder, 1715, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London). The revelation is instead suggested by a cloud, by a heavenly light, or an angel.

In modern art, Jacob's vision, especially visualized as a stairway, is significantly modified. Max Beckmann (1922, dry-point etching) combines the scene of Jacob's struggle with the angel with the ladder to heaven, showing the struggle taking place on the ladder itself. The angel lifts his arms to heaven, but whether this gesture signifies a blessing remains an open question. Contemporary art distances itself from the concrete, biblical source and focuses instead on the ladder or steps to heaven (see "Heavenly Ladder"). Magdalena Jetelová uses an iron set of steps into heaven as a monument (*Steig/Výstup*, 2005, Pax-Christi-Kirche, Krefeld, see → plate 11b). Maarja Wirkkala, on the other hand, attached gold-painted wooden ladders to various roofs in Graz/Austra (2003; see → plate 11a). The title *Tirami su* [transl. 'lift me high']: *Back to the roofs* invited viewers on an imaginary trip to heaven. However, movement from heaven to earth comparable to Jewish and Christian iconography fails to appear.

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Claudia Gärtner

VI. Music

In the medieval Latin church, the Genesis episode about Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:11–19) was reflected in several chants, as for instance the following responsory sung on Quadragesima Sunday:

Dum dormiret Jacob vidit scalam positam super terram et cacumen ejus tangens caelum et angelos ascendentes et descendentes et evigilans a somno dixit vere domus dei hic est.

(While Jacob slept he saw a ladder set up upon the earth, its top reaching to heaven, and angels ascending and descending; waking up from his sleep he said, surely this is God's house. (*Cantus Database*; cf. Gen 25:12, 17)

Jacob's realization that he dwelled in a sacred place and his setting up the stone he had used as a pillow, pouring oil over it (Gen 25:17–18), was understood as a dedication ritual of an altar in the medieval Latin church. Numerous medieval rituals for the dedication of a church altar and for dedications of churches refer to this episode, as for instance in the *Pontifical of the Roman Curia of the 13th century* (Goulet et al.: 210–11, 228–29, 236–37), which includes the singing of Jacob's words from Gen 28:17, *Terribilis est locus iste* as the Introit antiphon for the mass.

In the Roman Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages and until the 20th century, Jacob's

"awe-ful" experience of the ladder, of God's blessing, and of the sacredness of the place (Gen 28:13–17) was appropriated and used to express the holiness of medieval altars and, more generally, of sacred spaces in churches by way of the singing of this introit at the beginning of the dedication mass for churches (Hiley: 44–45; *Liber usualis*: 1250). *Terribilis est locus iste* was also set in polyphony in early modernity, for instance by Ludwicus Kraft (b. ca. 1460; Ward) and Giovanni Montella (1603; Shindler).

In modern times, Arnold Schoenberg's unfinished oratorio *Die Jakobsleiter* (Jacob's Ladder), set to his own libretto published in 1917, was mainly composed between 1917–22, (he partially orchestrated only its first part in 1944). It presents not the biblical narrative, but rather different human figures at various stages of a ladder between earth and heaven, followed and commented on by the archangel Gabriel. It is based on writings by Strindberg, Balzac and others, on theosophical ideas as well as on the notion of Jacob's ladder, including in addition other biblical references (Smither: 4:678–80; Schipperges: 37).

In the 20th century, instrumental music works written for dance theater reference Jacob's ladder. Darius Milhaud's *Les rêves de Jacob* (Jacob's Dreams, 1948) refers to various parts of the narrative in the first three of its five movements, and the second part of Russian composer Dmitri Smirnov's ballet music *Blake's Picture Cycle* (1990), based on watercolors by William Blake, is the story of "Jacob's Ladder" (Dowling Long/Sawyer: 116).

Also Maurice Jarre's score for Adrian Lyne's film *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) should be mentioned (see below "VII. Film"; Brill). Krzysztof Penderecki's *Przebudzenie Jakuba* (The Awakening of Jacob, 1974; Thomas) for orchestra was inspired by Jacob's experience of God's presence at Bethel, and the first movement of another purely instrumental piece for four cellos by the Russian composer Mikhail Bronner is called *Lestnitsa Iakova: Angel lyubvi, Angel pechali* (1996; Jacob's Ladder: the Angel of Love, the Angel of Sorrow; Grigor'yeva).

It is not surprising that numerous hymns reference Jacob's ladder. Sarah Flower Adams' hymn "Nearer my God to Thee" from the first half of the 19th century was inspired by Jacob's dream at Bethel (Dowling Long/Sawyer: 166). Other hymns referencing Jacob's ladder are Harry Loper's "As Jacob with travel was weary one day" from the early 20th century set to a traditional English carol of the 18th century and the African American Spiritual "We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder" (*Hymnary.org*).

In addition, in popular music, Jacob's ladder has often been referenced, most famously in "Stairway to Heaven" from the 1971 album of the English rock group Led Zeppelin, later also performed by numerous other artists (Dowling Long/Sawyer:

227). On *Lyricsmode's* webpage, there are several hits, among them a traditional song (with added lyrics by Pete Seeger) sung by Arlo Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen, and others, beginning with the lyrics: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder" (see also Dowling Long/Sawyer: 263). A love song by Mark Wills, "Jacob's Ladder," ends with the line "'Cause heaven was watin' [sic] at the top of Jacob's ladder," whereas the Stanley Brothers' "Jacob's Ladder" is a religious song briefly retelling the biblical narrative.

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Nils Holger Petersen

VII. Film

Jacob's ladder has been depicted in film surprisingly few times, compared with its vivid influence in other arts and literature. This is partly due to the fact that there are simply not many cinematic adaptations of the Jacob story. But even some of the films centered on Jacob either do not mention it at all (*La genèse*, dir. Cheick Oumar Sissoko, 1999, ML; *In the Beginning*, dir. Kevin Connor, 2000, US) or merely refer back to it in dialogue (*Giacobbe, l'uomo che lottò con Dio*, dir. Marcello Baldi, 1963, IT, *Jacob, the Man Who Fought with God*).

In *The Story of Jacob and Joseph* (dir. Michael Cacoyannis, 1974, US), Jacob's dream comes as a direct response to a prayer for a sign that he has acted rightly in stealing Esau's blessing. We see Jacob fall asleep and then wake up, but the dream itself is not shown. But Jacob does awaken next to a rocky wall with stair-like indentations, and there are inexplicably three cherubic children climbing up the rocks, which further evoke the imagery of the dream. This seems to give the dream a rationalistic interpretation in which the imagery itself is of little consequence, but is simply based on the natural surroundings. A unique conflation occurs at the end of this episode. After saying he is naming the place Bethel (Gen 28:19), Jacob then pronounces that his

Fig. 10 *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)

name is now Israel. In Gen 35, Jacob is renamed Israel at Bethel by God in a later episode.

Peter Hall's The Bible Collection film *Jacob* (1994, US) provides a fairly literal rendition of the episode. On Jacob's journey away from Esau (see Gen 35 for the episode as coming specifically during Jacob's flight), Jacob lies down to sleep one night. He then appears to wake up in the night, although perhaps it is still a dream as in Gen 28. A spot of light appears in the sky, and it then stretches down into the form of a narrow, shimmering ladder of light. There are no angels "ascending and descending" (cf. Gen 28:12), but there are vague clouds of dust or mist moving over the ladder in a way that evokes such motion. The Lord does not appear (cf. Gen 28:13), but an incorporeal voice makes the promise recorded in Gen 28:13–15. At the very end, three vague, angelic figures appear near the base of the ladder, but they do not move.

In non-biblical films, the most notable use of this trope is the film *Jacob's Ladder* (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1990, US, see fig. 10). This psychological thriller centers on a Vietnam War veteran, Jacob, who is haunted by bizarre hallucinations following a traumatic war experience. The film uses the Jacob's ladder trope in multiple ways. Jacob's hallucinations themselves are a kind of visionary experience. As they get worse, they become a "ladder" for his descent into a living hell (thus an inversion of the trope). Later in the film it is revealed that Jacob's experiences are the result of an experimental military drug, called "the Ladder." Then in the final scene, Jacob is shown ascending a softly illuminated staircase with his deceased son Gabe, presumably into the afterlife. The scene then cuts to a medical tent where it is revealed that Jacob has just died.

Bibliography: ■ Gravett, S., "What Lies Beyond? Biblical Images of Death and Afterlife in Film," in *The Bible in Motion*, vol. 1 (ed. R. Burnette-Bletsch; HBR 2; Berlin 2016) 391–403.

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See also → Jacob (Patriarch)