

Jacob's Ladder

Jacob's Ladder (Hebrew: **סולם יעקב** *Sulam Yaakov*) is an element in a dream that the biblical Patriarch **Jacob** has during his flight from his brother **Esau** in the *Book of Genesis*

The significance of the dream has been debated, but most interpretations agree that it identified Jacob with the obligations and inheritance of the people chosen by God, as understood in *Abrahamic religions*



Picture of the Jacob's Ladder in the original Luther Bibles (of 1534 and also 1545)

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Biblical narrative

The description of Jacob's ladder appears in *Genesis 28:10-19*

And Jacob went out from *Beer-sheba*, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon the place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took one of the stones of the place, and put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and beheld a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and beheld the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood beside him, and said: ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac. The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed. And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest, and will bring thee back into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.’ And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said: ‘Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not.’ And he was afraid, and said: ‘How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

— Genesis 28:10-17 Jewish Publication Society (1917)

Afterwards, Jacob names the place, *Bethel*" (literally, "House of God").

Judaism

The classic Torah commentaries offer several interpretations of Jacob's ladder. According to the Midrash Genesis Rabbah, the ladder signified the exiles which the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Messiah. First the angel representing the 70-year exile of Babylonia climbed "up" 70 rungs, and then fell "down". Then the angel representing the exile of Persia went up a number of steps, and fell, as did the angel representing the exile of Greece. Only the fourth angel, which represented the final exile of Rome/Edom (whose guardian angel was Esau himself), kept climbing higher and higher into the clouds. Jacob feared that his children would never be free of Esau's domination, but God assured him that at the End of Days, Edom too would come falling down.^[2]



Jacob's Dream (1639) by José de Ribera, at the Museo del Prado, Madrid

Another interpretation of the ladder keys into the fact that the angels first "ascended" and then "descended". The Midrash explains that Jacob, as a holy man, was always accompanied by angels. When he reached the border of the land of Canaan (the future land of Israel), the angels who were assigned to the Holy Land went back up to Heaven and the angels assigned to other lands came down to meet Jacob. When Jacob returned to Canaan he was greeted by the angels who were assigned to the Holy Land.

Yet another interpretation is this: The place at which Jacob stopped for the night was in reality Mount Moriah, the future home of the Temple in Jerusalem. The ladder therefore signifies the "bridge" between Heaven and earth, as prayers and sacrifices offered in the Holy Temple soldered a connection between God and the Jewish people. Moreover, the ladder alludes to the giving of the Torah as another connection between heaven and earth. In this interpretation, it is also significant that the Hebrew word for ladder, *sulam* (סֹלָם) and the name for the mountain on which the Torah was given, Sinai (סִינַי) have the same gematria (numerical value of the letters).



Jacob's Dream by William Blake (c. 1805, British Museum, London)^[1]

The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo, born in Alexandria, (d. ca. 50 CE) presents his allegorical interpretation of the ladder in the first book of his *De somniis*. There he gives four interpretations, which are not mutually exclusive.^[3]

- The angels represent souls descending to and ascending from bodies (some consider this to be Philo's clearest reference to the doctrine of reincarnation).
- In the second interpretation the ladder is the human soul and the angels are God's angels, pulling the soul up in distress and descending in compassion.
- In the third view the dream depicts the ups and downs of the life of the "practiser" (of virtue vs. sin).
- Finally the angels represent the continually changing affairs of men.

A hilltop overlooking the Israeli settlement of Beit El north of Jerusalem that is believed by some to be the site of Jacob's dream is a tourist destination during the holiday of Sukkot.^[4]

Christianity

Jesus said in John 1:51 "And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." This statement has been interpreted as associating or implicating Jesus with the mythical ladder, in that Christ bridges the gap between Heaven and Earth. Jesus presents himself as the reality to which the ladder points; as Jacob saw in a dream the reunion of Heaven and Earth, Jesus brought this reunion, metaphorically the ladder, into reality. Adam Clarke, an early 19th-century Methodist theologian and Bible scholar elaborates:

That by the angels of God ascending and descending, is to be understood, that a perpetual intercourse should now be opened between heaven and earth, through the medium of Christ, who was God manifested in the flesh. Our blessed Lord is represented in his mediatorial capacity as the ambassador of

God to men; and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, is a metaphor taken from the custom of dispatching couriers or messengers from the prince to his ambassador in a foreign court, and from the ambassador back to the prince.^[5]

The theme of a ladder to heaven is often used by the Church Fathers. Irenaeus in the second century describes the Christian Church as the "ladder of ascent to God".^[6]

In the third century, Origen^[7] explains that there are two ladders in the life of a Christian, the ascetic ladder that the soul climbs on the earth, by way of—and resulting in—an increase in virtue, and the soul's travel after death, climbing up the heavens towards the light of God.

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nazianzus^[8] speaks of ascending Jacob's Ladder by successive steps towards excellence, interpreting the ladder as an ascetic path, while Saint Gregory of Nyssa narrates^[9] that Moses climbed on Jacob's Ladder to reach the heavens where he entered the tabernacle not made with hands, thus giving the Ladder a clear mystical meaning. The ascetic interpretation is found also in Saint John Chrysostom, who writes:

"And so mounting as it were by steps, let us get to heaven by a Jacob's ladder. For the ladder seems to me to signify in a riddle by that vision the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners."^[10]

Jacob's Ladder as an analogy for the spiritual ascetic of life enjoyed wide influence thanks to the classical work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus.

Islam

Jacob (Arabic: يَعْقُوب, translit. *Ya'qūb*) is revered in Islam as a prophet and patriarch. Muslim scholars drew a parallel with Jacob's vision of the ladder^[11] and Muhammad's event of the Mi'raj.^[12] The ladder of Jacob was interpreted by Muslims to be one of the many symbols of God, and many saw Jacob's ladder as representing in its form the essence of Islam, which emphasizes following the "straight path". The twentieth-century scholar Martin Lings described the significance of the ladder in the Islamic mystic perspective:

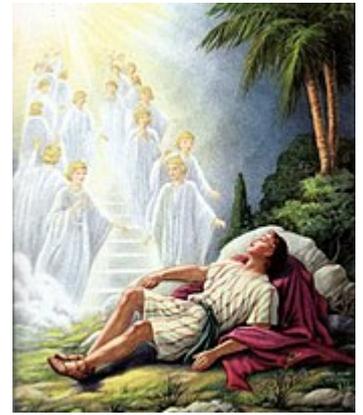
The ladder of the created Universe is the ladder which appeared in a dream to Jacob, who saw it stretching from Heaven to earth, with Angels going up and down upon it; and it is also the "straight path", for indeed the way of religion is none other than the way of creation itself retraced from its end back to its Beginning.^[13]

Pseudepigraphic apocalyptic literature

The narrative of Jacob's Ladder was used, shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple in the Siege of Jerusalem (70 CE), as basis for the pseudepigraphic *Ladder of Jacob*. This writing, preserved only in Old Church Slavonic, interprets the experience of Patriarchs in the context of Merkabah mysticism

Cultural references

Jacob's Ladder has been depicted in many artworks, the largest of which is the facade of Bath Abbey in England where sculptures depict angels climbing up and down ladders on either side of the main window on the west front.



Jacob's Ladder, circa 1925, European Christian illustration



Jacob's Dream Artwork on the campus of Abilene Christian University

See also

- [Crepuscular rays](#)
- [Jacob's Ladder \(disambiguation\)](#)
- ["Locus iste" motet by Anton Bruckner](#)
- ["Nearer, My God, to Thee" hymn lyrics \(written 1841\) by Sarah Flower Adams](#)
- [Rectify, S1E6: "Jacob's Ladder"](#)
- [Stairway to Heaven \(disambiguation\)](#)
- [Trāyastriṃśā](#)

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8. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Homily n. 43 (Funeral Oration on the Great S. Basil)* 71
9. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 224-227
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13. Martin Lings, *The Book of Certainty*, Pg. 51

External links

- [Jacob's Ladder from a Jewish perspective](#) at Chabad.org

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This page was last edited on 10 December 2018, at 21:09 (UTC).

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The angels climb Jacob's Ladder on the west front of Bath Abbey.

