

ladder ; scale, system מִלָּא

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Jacob, Ya'akov (Hebrew name) יַעֲקֹב

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Jacob's Ladder

For other uses, see Jacob's Ladder (disambiguation).

Jacob's Ladder (Hebrew: *Sulam Yaakov* סולם יעקב) is a staircase to heaven that the biblical Patriarch Jacob dreams about during his flight from his brother Esau. It is described in the Book of Genesis.

Source

The description of Jacob's ladder appears in Genesis 28:10-19 ^[1],

Jacob left Beersheba, and went toward Haran. He came to the place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it [or "beside him"] and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." And he was afraid, and said, "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

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



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



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

Judaism

The classic Torah commentaries offer several interpretations of Jacob's ladder. According to the Midrash, 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. Wikipedia:Citation needed

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.

The place at which Jacob stopped for the night was in reality Mount Moriah, the future home of the Temple in Jerusalem. Wikipedia:Citation needed 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. The Hebrew word for ladder, *sulam* (סֹלֶם) and the name for the mountain on which the Torah was given, *Sinai* (סִינַי) have the same gematria (numerical value of the letters).

The Hellenistic Jewish Biblical philosopher Philo Judaeus, 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:

- 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 *logoi*, 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 Sukkoth.



Monument to the sixteen civilians killed by Hamas, in the city of Beer Sheva, Israel, 2004. The engraved quotation reads: "And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" (Gen 28:12 in Hebrew)

Christianity

The theme of a ladder to heaven is often used by the Early Church Fathers. Saint Irenaeus in the 2nd century describes the Christian Church as the "ladder of ascent to God".^[2]

In the 3rd century, Origen^[3] 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 4th century, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus^[4] speaks of ascending Jacob's Ladder by successive steps towards excellence, interpreting the ladder as an ascetic path, while Saint Gregory of Nyssa narrates^[5] 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."^[6]

Jacob's Ladder as an analogy for the spiritual ascetic of life had a large diffusion through the classical work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by St. John Climacus.

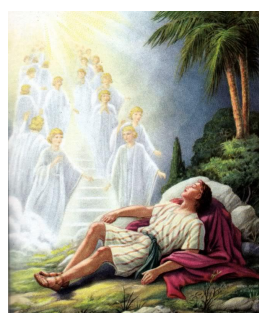
Furthermore, Jesus can be seen as being the ladder, in that Christ bridges the gap between Heaven and Earth. Jesus presents himself as the reality to which the ladder points; as Jacob saw in a dream the reunion of Heaven and Earth, Jesus brought this reunion, metaphorically the ladder, into reality. 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."

Gallery



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



Jacob's Ladder, circa 1925, European Christian illustration



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

Pseudepigraphic apocalyptic literature

The narrative of Jacob's Ladder was used, shortly after the Destruction of the Temple, 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.

Islam

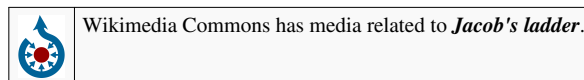
Jacob is revered in Islam as a prophet and patriarch. Muslim scholars, especially of the perennialist tradition, Wikipedia:Please clarify drew a parallel with Jacob's vision of the ladder and Muhammad's event of the Mi'raj.^[7] The ladder of Jacob was interpreted by Muslims to be one of the many symbols 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.^[8]

References

- [1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+28%3A10-19&version=ESV>
 - [2] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III,24,1
 - [3] Origen, *Homely n. 27 on Numbers*, about Nm 33:1–2
 - [4] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Homely n. 43 (Funeral Oration on the Great S. Basil)*, 71
 - [5] Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses 224-227*
 - [6] John Chrysostom, *The Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* n. 83,5., Text from CCEL (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.iv.lxxxv.html>)
 - [7] *The Vision of Islam*, Murata and Chittick, Pg. 84
 - [8] *The Book of Certainty*, Martin Lings, Pg. 51
- Scherman, Rabbi Nosson (1993). *The Chumash*. Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications.

External links



- Jacob's Ladder from a Jewish perspective (<http://www.chabad.org/k2439>) at Chabad.org
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