

Jacob's Ladder

- ¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran.
- ¹¹ And he came to a certain 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.
- ¹² 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!
- ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it 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 offspring.
- ¹⁴ Your offspring 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.
- ¹⁵ 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 what I have promised you."
- ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."
- ¹⁷ And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."
- ¹⁸ So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.
- ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.
- ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,
- ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God,
- ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

Genesis 28:10-22

The clouds prepare for battle
In the dark and brooding silence
Bruised and sullen storm clouds
Have the light of day obscured
Looming low and ominous
In twilight premature
Thunder heads are rumbling
In a distant overture...

All at once, the clouds are parted
Light streams down in bright unbroken beams...

Follow men's eyes as they look to the skies
The shifting shafts of shining weave the fabric of their dreams...

(Rush, Jacob's Ladder)

Climbing Jacob's Ladder

Throughout the world today, thousands of children will sing the song *Jacob's Ladder*. “We are climbing Jacob's ladder, We are climbing Jacob's ladder, We are climbing Jacob's ladder, Soldiers of the cross.” At first glance, the song appears to be a hopelessly confused theological mess about working one's way up to heaven. Who has the audacity to think they can climb Jacob's Ladder? Some scholars have indeed interpreted it that way.¹ So have lesser scholars. Huey Lewis (via his friend Bruce Hornsby) seems to be an example as he sang a song by the same title about so many Christian evangelists who tell you they can get you to heaven if you just give them money, meanwhile they are themselves utter hypocrites in the way they live their own personal lives: “Sing along, send some money, Join the chosen few. Well mister I'm not in a hurry, And I don't want to be like you ... Step by step, one by one Higher and higher Step by step, rung by rung Climbing Jacob's ladder.”

In actuality, the original song is a very old negro spiritual and has little to do with works salvation. Rather, it has to do with emancipation. Dave Marsh's liner notes say it is:

... based on Genesis 28:11-19 ... It refers to the prophetic dream given to Jacob at Beth-El, while he is fleeing his brother, Esau, whom Jacob has cheated out of his inheritance. In the dream, angels are ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. While they do this, God promises Jacob that his seed 'shall be as the dust of the earth' and spread throughout the world. Slaves related to the dream powerfully, because it ended with a covenant that promised liberation: 'I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee.'”²

Perhaps it still seems strange that this would have anything to do with freedom from slavery. And yet, this interpretation actually fits with the way the ancient Jews sometimes thought about the ladder.

What I want to do is give you three complementary ways that the story of Jacob's ladder has been interpreted for thousands of years. They do not by any means exhaust how this story has been used by preachers and teachers, but they do begin to get at what is going on here in some very interesting and even accurate ways. What you will discover is that these themes are intimately tied to the a very supernatural

¹ Cf. Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 95.

² Dave Marsh, “Jacob's Ladder,” in *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions – Liner Notes*. Columbia Records: SONY BMG MUSIC ENTERTAINMENT, 2006. <http://frankenschulz.de/bruce/seeger-sessions.html>, Last accessed 11-5-2014.

worldview. Any why not? After all, in the story we have numerous angels and God himself (as the Angel of the LORD most likely) talking to Jacob.

Ladder as place of divine council members.

First, look at the strange language of how it says angels were ascending and descending upon it (**Gen 28:12**). With that as the starting point, I want to look at the ladder as **the place where divine council members ascend and descend**. The Divine Council is—as Psalm 82, Psalm 89, Isaiah 6, 1 Kgs 22; Daniel 7 and many other passages explain (and as we saw way back in Genesis 2-3), a phrase used by the **Bible, Ancient Near Eastern cultures**, and “**by Hebrew and Semitics scholars to refer to the heavenly host, the pantheon of divine beings [elohim] who administer the affairs of the cosmos.**”³ The biblical council does not put God on a scale of being with other *elohim*, but it does still acknowledge that created heavenly beings help govern his universe. Genesis refers to these council members as “**gods**” (**Gen 3:5** KJV; cf. **Ex 20:3**), the “**sons of God**” (**Gen 6:1-4**; cf. **Job 38:7**), and “**princes**” (**Dan 10:13, 20**), while the NT refers to them as “**thrones**” or “**dominions**” or “**rulers**” or “**lords**” or “**powers**” or “**authorities.**” Daniel specifically identifies three of them as the princes of Persia (**Dan 10:13**), Greece (**10:20**), and Michael the prince of Israel (**12:1**). Michael and perhaps the others is actually an archangel (**Jude 1:9**).

Now, as I said, Jews thought about this ladder in terms of exile and freedom from slavery, just as black slaves 200 years ago did. As one person has said, “**According to the Midrash [ancient Jewish interpretation], the ladder signified the exiles which the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Messiah.**”⁴ He continues by talking about the angels on the ladder.

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.

³ Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council,” in Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008). See also Michael S. Heiser, “Divine Council,” in Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2012).

⁴ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, *The Chumash* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1993).

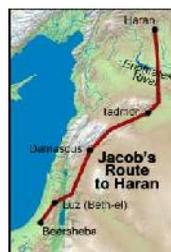
But now listen to how the nearly 2,000 year old Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (80-118 C.E.; a collection of midrashim mostly on Genesis) interprets this. It uses Divine Council language, but says the same thing:

"And behold the angels of God ascending and descending": These are the princes of the heathen nations which God showed Jacob our father. The Prince of Babylon ascended seventy steps and descended, Media, fifty-two and descended, Greece, one hundred steps and descended, Edom ascended and no one knows how many! In that hour, Jacob was afraid and said: "Perhaps this one has no descent?" Said the Holy One blessed be He to him: "Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob ... neither be dismayed, O Israel." Even if thou seest him, so to speak, ascend and sit by Me, I bring him down!⁵

It is easy to hear the echoes of Daniel's world empires as well as his angelic princes here. Throughout his commentary, Eliezer refers to the "seventy angels who surround the throne of God's glory" and who confused the languages of the seventy nations at Babel.⁶ Now he says that some of these princes rose to world domination only to fall, and that Israel need only trust in God for final deliverance. This is the same worldview we have seen in our own study of Genesis. So for some reason, heavenly sons of God go up and down on this ladder. But why?

Ladder as place of the cosmic mountain.

The answer has to do with what this ladder actually is. Let's look at the text for a moment to see how it has been interpreted. Isaac has just sent Jacob away so that he might get a wife from his relatives in Haran. So it says, "Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran" (Gen 28:10). On his long journey to Haran, Jacob would have travelled north near (Jeru)Salem and on up towards the area most believe is ancient Bethel (some dozen miles north of Jerusalem), about 10 miles away.



⁵ "Vision of Jacob at Bethel 265," in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, trans. Gerald Friedlander (New York: The Bloch Publishing Company, 1916),

http://archive.org/stream/pirkderabbieli00frieuoft/pirkderabbieli00frieuoft_djvu.txt, last accessed 11-5-2014.

⁶ Cf. "176 Rabbi Eliezer," and "Nimrod and the Tower of Babel 177."

Now listen to how some clever Rabbis interpreted the place Jacob stayed, slept, and dreamed about this ladder. “He came to a certain place” (28:11) literally reads, “He came to the place”⁷ and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. A thousand year ago, **Rabbi Rashi** (1040 – 1105 A.D.) wrote:

The Torah does not tell us which place. Instead it uses the definite article in the place, implying that the identity of the place was so well known that it need not be specified. This indicates that it refers to the site referred to elsewhere by the designation the place: Mount Moriah, of which it is said [in **Gen 22:4** (see also **Deut16:16**)]: ‘he saw the place from afar’ ... It cannot refer to any place other than Mount Moriah since the Torah itself refers to that holy site as *makom*, the place, in several places [Gen 22:4].⁸

I’m not saying that Jacob had his dream on the very place that Isaac was offered up. That is almost certainly Rabbinical fanciful imagination. But I tell it to you to show you that they identified the place with a holy mountain, indeed with the very place that God would build his house-temple in Jerusalem.

Similarly, another interpretation, this time from the **Midrash Rabba** (perhaps 4th – 5th cent. A.D.) says:

The Rabbis related it to Sinai. AND HE DREAMED, AND BEHOLD A LADDER symbolizes Sinai; SET UP ON THE EARTH, as it says, 'And they stood at the foot of the mountain' (**Ex 19:17**); AND THE TOP OF IT REACHED TO HEAVEN - 'And the mountain burned with fire unto the heart of heaven' (**Deut 4:11**). AND BEHOLD THE ANGELS OF GOD alludes to Moses and Aaron. ASCENDING: 'And Moses went up to God' (**Ex 19:3**); AND DESCENDING - 'And Moses went down from the mount' (ib. 14). AND BEHOLD, THE LORD STOOD BESIDE HIM - And the Lord came down upon mount Sinai (ib. 20).⁹

Again, my point is to show you that they related the ladder to a mountain. But why would they do this?

⁷ As Wenham shows, one can interpret the definite article indefinitely. But it is not at all clear that it must be that way here.

⁸ Cited in Mina Fouad Tawfike, “Commentary on Genesis 28:10-22: Jacob’s Ladder,” *Alexandria School of Theology* (2007-8). https://www.academia.edu/1768120/Commentary_on_Genesis_28_10-22_Jacobs_ladder, last accessed 11-5-2014.

⁹ Cited in Rav Zvi Shimon, “The Stairway to Heaven,” in *Introduction to Parashat Hashavua*, <http://vbmtorah.org/archive/intparsha71/07-71vayetze.htm>, last accessed 11-5-2014.

It is because throughout the entire ancient world (not even just the Near East), peoples believed that the gods (divine council) ruled and descended to earth on **sacred mountains**. We say this in our study of Mt. Eden. But other places say the same thing. Deuteronomy says, “The LORD came from **Sinai** and dawned from **Seir** upon us; he shone forth from **Mount Paran**; he came from the ten **thousands of holy ones** [LXX: “angels”] with flaming fire at his right hand” (Deut 33:2). Helel ben-Shachar (Lucifer) said, “I will **climb up to the sky**. Above the **stars** of El I will set up my throne. I will **rule on the mountain of assembly** on the remote **slopes of Zaphon**” (Isa 14:13 NET). Or again the Psalm, “O mountain of God, **mountain of Bashan**; O many-peaked mountain, mountain of Bashan! Why do you look with hatred, O many-peaked mountain, at the **mount that God desired for his abode**, yes, where the LORD will dwell forever? The **chariots of God** are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands [“two thousand angels *guiding them*”¹⁰]; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary” (Ps 68:15-17). In fact, the DSS calls it “Luz which is on the mountain.”¹¹ Think of **Mt. Olympus** and the gods ruling from its peak and you get the idea.

Ancient peoples were so enamored by this that they erected mountain-like religious structures to emulate and even contact and perhaps control these gods. As we have seen, this is exactly what the “tower” of Babel was. Whether pyramids like those found in Europe, China, or Egypt, or ziggurats such as those built in the Middle East, North America, South America, the idea seems to have been the same. Build a religious structure to contact and interact with heavenly beings.

PYRAMIDS, ZIGGURATS, AND COSMIC MOUNTAINS OF THE WORLD



King Naram-Sin at the foot of *Khursag* 23rd cent. B.C.



Pyramids surrounding Xi'an, China



Pyramids of Giza Egypt



Pyramid of the Sun, Visoko City, Bosnia



Mound (Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site), Collinsville, Illinois



Artistic Rendition: Tower of Babel



Ur-Nammu (2,100 B.C.?) in Ur, Iraq
Oldest Reconstructed Ziggurat in the World



Pyramid of the Moon Teotihuacán, Mexico



Temple of Kukulkan, Chichen Itza, Yucatan



Goguryeo's Pyramid Korea, 500 A.D.

¹⁰ This is from the Psalm Targum and it helps to show that the myriads of chariots are the angels of God.

¹¹ Dead Sea Scrolls, 1Q17 Frag. 1:3.

So what does this have to do with Jacob’s “ladder?” Notice how our story continues, “**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). The ESV’s “ladder” is a translation that may be informed by Hittite texts that talk about a ritual ladder being lowered into pits for spirits long dead.¹² Other cultures had ladders that ascended to heaven as kinds of links between heaven and earth.

Nippur (Iraq)	Ur (Iraq)	Uruk (Iraq)
		
		
		
<p>“Temple of the Mountain Breeze” aka Ziggurat of Nippur (with newer building on top).</p>	<p>Ziggurat of Ur to Nanna/Sin</p>	<p>White Temple to Nanna/Sin and Ziggurat of Uruk</p>

Curiously, the word *sullam* () comes from the verb *salam* () meaning “lift up,” as in, “**Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts**” (Ps 68:4). But the Hebrew word here is not a ladder. Sadly, **Led Zeppelin** got it more correct than the ESV. It is a “**Stairway to Heaven,**”

¹² H. Hoffner, “Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew ‘ôb,” *JBL* 86 (1967) 385-401. Cited in **John Walton**, “The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 161.

such as those on Ziggurats (above). The Hebrew word (*sullam*) is related to an Akkadian word (*simmiltu*) that means **stairway**. In fact, this word is part of the name of a specific huge **pile of stones**¹³ built long ago into a ziggurat at Sippar in Iraq/Babylon called, “**Temple of the Stairway to Pure Heaven.**” Along with other names such as “**Temple of the Mountain Breeze,**” “**Temple of the Exalted Mountain,**” and “**Temple of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth,**” these ziggurats **connected our realm to the realm of the gods at fixed points** on these so-called “cosmic mountains.”¹⁴

It was via a stairway like this that the ancient myth called Nergal (“Great Watcher;”¹⁵ cf. **2 Kings, 17:30**) and Ereshkigal tells of the angelic messenger god Namtar Journeying from the netherworld, “*Ascend[ing], Namtar, the long [staircase of the heavens]*”¹⁶ to the gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea. So this is why the angels of God are here in this dream, ascending and descending on this stairway. Jacob knew exactly what he was seeing. It was, as the idea of a temple (“Temple” is almost always in the actual ancient names of the Ziggurats) explains, the very house of God, and the place where heavenly bureaucracy is carried out.

If we go to **Genesis 28:16** we see Jacob awaking from his sleep. He immediately thinks to himself, “**Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.**” And it says next, “**He was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’**” (17). Think of Israel who came to the foot of Mt. Sinai and it says, “**On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled**” (**Ex 19:16**). Why? As the Psalm said, Sinai was the place God desired for his abode (**Ps 68:16-17**). Or Exodus, “**Plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode**” (**Ex 15:17**). Jacob had wandered into the very home of God. The *Bible Backgrounds Commentary* on Genesis is very helpful here,

There is a continuum in space between the heavenly dwelling and the earthly one such that they are not simply considered mirror images or paired structures, but in the sense that they are more like the upstairs and downstairs of the same building. Yet it is even more than that, as the earthly temple can be thought of as actually existing in the heaven-

¹³ The word *salam* also means “pile up” (Jer 50:26).

¹⁴ See **Richard J. Clifford**, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

¹⁵ Sumerian Dictionary, <http://www.lowchensaustralia.com/names/sumerian-dictionary.htm>

¹⁶ “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” in James Bennett Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East an Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, 3rd ed. with Supplement. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 508.

ly realm. The temple is a place in both worlds,^{A-98} just as the grave is a place both on earth and in the netherworld. One might compare it to the wardrobe in the Chronicles of Narnia, which exists in both worlds.¹⁷

Ladder as an Apocalyptic Prophecy.

So we have seen how the Ladder is a place of divine council members and how it is actually a cosmic mountain with a stairway that links heaven and earth. The final thing I want to look at is how the ladder has been viewed as the place of apocalyptic prophecy.¹⁸ Recall how we said, “According to the Midrash, the ladder signified the exiles which the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Messiah.” “Before the coming of the Messiah” makes it both prophetic and apocalyptic. But again, how so?

A first century runaway bestseller being read by Jews and Christians alike was called, curiously enough, *The Ladder of Jacob*. It was a short story, originally six chapters that tell us about what the author thought Jacob was seeing. In the biblical story, after we read about angels of God ascending and descending on the stairway, “And behold, the LORD stood above it” (Gen 28:13). Here is that now familiar imagery of a physical presence standing. Hence, the Angel of the LORD.¹⁹

Here, the ancient *Ladder* book says, “And the top of the ladder was the face as of a man, carved out of fire. There were twelve steps leading to the top of the ladder, and on each step to the top there were two human faces, on the right and on the left, twenty-four faces including their chests” (Ladder of Jacob 1:4-5). This is similar to what John describes in the Apocalypse with 24 elders (Rev 4:10).

Then it says that the God who “carries the whole world under [his] arm, yet not being borne by anyone (LJ 2:9) ... who made the skies firm for the glory of his Name (10) ... [has] fiery Lightning-eyed holy ones” (17) around him singing “Holy, Holy, Holy ... Holy, Glory, God of Hosts, God of Ages ... Strong, Blessed, Eternal King, Mighty, Powerful, Most Great, Patient, Blessed One” (18-19). This is similar to what Isaiah saw when he beheld Jesus in the Temple (Isa 6:1ff; cf. John 12:41).

Suddenly, Sariel the archangel of dreams (3:2) said, “The ladder is this age, and the twelve steps are the periods of this age. But the twenty-four faces are the

^{A-98} Houtman, “What Did Jacob See?” 345: “where heaven and earth melted into one.”

¹⁷ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 107.

¹⁸ This is the reason why I chose to put the song by Rush at the beginning of this sermon.

¹⁹ The Targums all have what we would call the Father speaking here, but promising that the Memra-Word would be with Jacob (Gen 28:15).

kings of the ungodly nations of this age. Under these kings the children of your children and the generations of your sons will be interrogated (5:3-5) ... Know, Jacob, that your descendants shall be exiles in a strange land (16) ... [but] judgment will come upon that place. Then your seed, Israel, will go out of slavery (6:1) ... [then] the angels and archangels will hurl their bolts of lightning before [the kings of this age] for the sake of the salvation of your tribe (6) ... There will be earthquakes and much destruction. And the LORD will pour out his wrath against Leviathan the sea-dragon (11-12) ... And then your seed will sound the horn and all the kingdom of Edom will perish together with all the peoples of Moab (15).”

So where would all of this apocalyptic imagery come from in the actual story of Jacob? I think it comes from a **combination** of understanding that Jacob is seeing the place where the divine council deliberates over the earth combined with the words of God to Jacob combined with reflection upon what has happened to Israel all these centuries later. Let’s look at what Christ says to Jacob in the story.

“And behold, the LORD stood above [the stairway] 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 seed. Your seed 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 in you and your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 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 what I have promised you’” (Gen 28:13-15). For a moment, consider this promise in the light of Jacob’s death-bed blessing to Joseph, “And he blessed Joseph and said, ‘The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my Shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys’” (Gen 48:15-16). As we can see from his own confession of faith, Jacob knew that the God who blessed him here at this place was the Angel of the LORD.

This promise including the land, a mighty nation of people, and spreading abroad over the whole earth so that all nations would be blessed. This is a repeat of the **covenant language** with Abraham. The Jews took the personal promise to return Jacob to the land corporately, as a promise to return the nation to the land after the exile in Babylon. Thus, they saw prophecy for themselves. But as they reflected on their long struggles in the hands of various world empires, they also thought apocalyptically, and turned the story into one of God finally saving them from their enemies through a Seed, a Messiah. Now, I want to turn your thoughts heavenward, towards this great Messiah in some very remarkable ways.

Jesus: the Ladder, the Stone, and the Seed.

Let me tell you what Christians did with this old Jewish book *The Ladder of Jacob*. You see, originally the story had six chapters. Today, it has seven. As they did with so many of the Jewish books, Christians took these stories and used them as a way to tell the story of Jesus Christ. They desperately wanted Jew and Gentile alike to know the glories of the Only Savior. So why not use their own stories to teach them about Christ? Listen then to a portion of this wonderful chapter:

¹“And as for the angels you saw descending and ascending the ladder, ²in the last years there will be a man from the Most High, and he will desire to join the upper things with the lower. ³And before his coming your sons and daughters will tell about him and your young men will have visions about him ... ⁹And then the expected one will come, whose path will not be noticed by anyone. “Then the earth will be glorified, receiving heavenly glory. ^{10,11}What was above will be below also. ¹²And from your seed will bloom a root of kings; ¹³it will emerge and overthrow the power of evil. ¹⁴And he himself will be the Savior for every land and rest for those who toil, and a cloud shading the whole world from the burning heat ... ¹⁶If he does not come, the lower things cannot be joined with the upper ²⁰... the Almighty will be on earth in body ... ²⁹He will work wonders in heaven and on earth. ³⁰And he will be wounded in the midst of his beloved house. ³¹And when he is wounded, then salvation will be ready, and the end to all perdition ... ³³And all creation will bow to him who was wounded, and many will trust in him. ³⁴And he will become known everywhere in all lands, and those who acknowledge his name will not be ashamed. ³⁵His own dominion and years will be unending forever.”²⁰

(Ladder of Jacob 7:1-3, 9-14, 16, 20, 29-31, 33-35)

So where would they get the idea that Jesus is in this story of Jacob’s Ladder? Is it all just wishful thinking, bizarre speculations of Jews and Christians alike? We have already seen that Jesus is the Angel of the LORD, but there is much more in this amazing story that that.

Place/House of the Logos

First, this curious idea of being “wounded in the midst of his beloved house” deserves a comment. Remember, Jacob says this place is the “house of God” (**Gen 28:17**) and so he names it Beth-El (**19**). And some of the Jews thought this vision took place on **Mt. Moriah**, though that is almost certainly not true. There is one

²⁰ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 410–411.

more thing to add. Our old friend **Philo**, the Jewish theologian and historian contemporary with Jesus explains that when a person goes to the place of dreams, they go to the place of words—*logos*. In light of this he says, “On which account we now read in the scripture, ‘He met the place; for the sun was set’ [Gen 28:11].”²¹ “‘This is none other than the house of God’ ... What, then, can it be except the *Logos*, which is more ancient than all the things which were the objects of creation, and by means of which it is the Ruler of the universe, taking hold of it as a rudder, governs all things.”²² And so for many Jews, “the place” Jacob slept was not Moriah, but the house of the *Logos*. Apparently, some early Christians thought the same way.

Ascending and Descending: The Ladder of Christ

Second, consider this language of ascending and descending of the angels in the story. Jesus said of himself, “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:13). The Apostle comments on this saying, “In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? [in other words, Jesus was born of a virgin]. He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (Eph 4:9-10). Brothers and sisters, this is our faith, and it is right here in Jacob’s dream.

“The righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word²³ is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)” (Rom 10:6-8). “There is no need to ascend into heaven to ‘bring down Christ.’ For in the incarnation, the Messiah, God’s Son, has been truly ‘brought down’ already.”²⁴ Your job is to believe that it has happened, even as Jacob would have believed the promise that was going to happen. And how do we know? Because God has raised him from the dead and he ascended back into heaven before many witnesses.

This is the very word of faith that Jesus proclaimed to Nathaniel on the day he called him to be his disciple. “He said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of

²¹ Philo, *On Dreams* 1.115-6; in Charles Duke Yonge with Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 375.

²² Philo, *The Migration of Abraham* 5-6, in Charles Duke Yonge with Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 253.

²³ Paul does not use *logos* here as John might have. Instead, he uses *rhema*.

²⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 655.

Man” (John 1:51). And a little later, Christ will be “lifted up” on the cross (John 3:14-15). Do you remember how the “ladder” is related to the word “lift up?” Do you see what Jesus is saying? He says that he is the ladder that links heaven and earth. He is the stairway, the house of God, the navel of the world, the pillar of the earth. It is through him and him alone that one rises to see heaven because through him and him alone God has descended to the earth in the flesh.

Christ: The Stone of Jacob

There is one final way I wish to tell you about Jesus in this passage. It has to do with this strange stone that Jacob uses. First, he takes “one of the stones of the place” puts it under his head and lays down in that place to sleep (Gen 28:11). After awaking and realizing where he is and what he has seen we read, “So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it” (18).

What was the purpose of this stone?²⁵ Was it a memorial? Was it a pillar of witness? Maybe both, but Jacob tells us exactly what he hoped it would later become, “This stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house” (22). In the ancient mind, people made their idols out of stone and wood, because (as we saw in the Garden of Eden), wood and stone were materials closely identified with them. As one scholar writes, “Sacred stones sometimes considered as the dwelling of the god or even as the god himself.”²⁶

With both the stone and its anointing, the church has throughout its long history, seen Christ. Augustine says:

²⁵ **GOING DEEPER:** Many fanciful traditions say that the famous “Stone of Scone” (aka “Stone of Destiny” or “Coronation Stone”) which sat for many centuries in Westminster Abbey and is sometimes said to be the stone into which Merlin lodged Excalibur, is also said by some to have been the stone which Jacob rested his head upon when he had the dream of the stairway to heaven at Bethel. See Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* OUP (1993). It was broken in half in 1950, repaired, and subsequently lost to history ever since.



Replica of the Stone of Scone.

²⁶ J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire*, BibOr19 [Rome: Biblical Institute, 1967] 90, cited in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 224.

This is prophetic. For Jacob did not pour oil on the stone in an idolatrous way, as if making it a god; neither did he adore that stone, or sacrifice to it. But since the name of Christ comes from the chrism or anointing, something pertaining to the great mystery was certainly represented in this. And the Saviour Himself is understood to bring this latter to remembrance in the gospel, when He says of Nathanael, “Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” because Israel who saw this vision is no other than Jacob²⁷ ... The stone was anointed. Why a stone? “Behold, I lay in Zion a chosen stone, precious; and he who believes in it shall not be confounded” (1 Pet 2:6; Is 28:16). Why anointed? Because [the name] “Christ” [is derived] from [the word] *chrisma*.²⁸

Now, the words “poured oil” in our passage are later changed to “anointed” (Gen 31:13) where Christ says to Jacob, “I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.” This is the verb *mashiach*, from which we get the noun “Messiah.”

The word for the stone is *eben* () and it comes from the word *banah* () meaning “to build” (see Strong’s Concordance), as in building ziggurats. Jacob is building God’s house with this stone. It is obviously figurative in some sense, since it has only one stone. Yet many have thought of it as a cornerstone. Jesus Christ is the Chief Cornerstone of the church (Eph 2:20). “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Ps 118:22; Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7). He is a “stone of stumbling” (Isa 8:14; Rom 9:32-33); the Rock of Salvation in the wilderness (Deut 32:15; 1 Cor 10:4), a Strong Rock (Ps 31:2), a Rock Fortress (Ps 18:2), a Rock to set my feet upon (Ps 40:2), the Rock that is higher than me (Ps 61:2), a Rock of Refuge (Ps 62:7; 94:22).

And can we forget about Daniel who interpreted the dream of the king of Babylon, showing the king the eschatology of the coming Messiah against the princes and kings of heaven and earth? “This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer thresh-

²⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “The City of God,” in *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods, vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 333.

²⁸ Augustine, Tractate on the Gospel of John 7.23.2. in Mark Sheridan, *Genesis 12-50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 192.

ing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth” (Dan 2:31-35). Even non-Christians like Josephus believed this to be a Messianic prophecy. Perhaps Jacob himself sums it up best when, again blessing Joseph on his death bed he says, “From the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob (From there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel)” (Gen 49:24).

Dr. Heiser sums it up this way, “These three threads—the stone altar at Bethel, marking the abode of God and his council, the stone of the kingdom of God, and the cornerstone of the temple—converge in the mission of Christ, the incarnate Yahweh ... Jesus is the conduit from God to man. He was—quite literally—where heaven and earth intersected. His blood would be the ultimate sacrifice, the culmination point for the sacrifice at Bethel.”²⁹

Matthew Henry says, “[Christ] is this ladder, the foot on earth in his human nature, the top in heaven in his divine nature: or the former in his humiliation, the latter in his exaltation. All the intercourse between heaven and earth, since the fall, is by this ladder. Christ is the way; all God’s favors come to us, and all our services go to him, by Christ” (Matthew Henry, *Commentary Gen 28:10-15*).

What then should be your response to these things? Look at Jacob’s. After building the house, he takes a vow and says, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you” (Gen 28:20-22). You are not to test God as Jacob did, but you are to believe what Jacob himself came to believe, that God had done all of these for him, and so he became his God, and he worshiped and trusted in this God, giving him—like Abraham did—a tenth of all he had.³⁰ Thanking him and blessing his children in Christ with his dying breath.

Have you seen him? Have you met him? Has he spoken to you through his word? Truly, he is an awesome God. The God of Bethel. The Rock of Israel. The Rock made Flesh in the person of Christ, in whom you may be certain that you have salvation.

²⁹ Michael S. Heiser, *The Myth that is True 2.0*, unpublished book, Feb 20, 2010, 267-68.

³⁰ Note that the “tenth” idea, the tithe, again predates the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai.