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The Motif of Jacob’s Ladder (Gen 28:10–22) in the Ancient Symbolism of Western Christianity¹

Abstract: The “Jacob’s ladder” episode from the book of Genesis inspired numerous symbolic interpretations in ancient Christianity. Most often we encounter moral symbolism, which basically proceeds in two directions. Following Tertullian, “descending angels” symbolize sinners, and “ascending” – righteous people. According to Augustine, “descending” mean those who take care of the needs of others, while “ascending” are those who direct their hearts to God. For Jerome, ascending and descending angels symbolize not so much people as the mercy of God who descends to the sinner, whereas for Ambrose and Zeno of Verona the ladder represents the Old and New Testament, and its rungs – the Christian virtues. An important literary motif in the story of the “Jacob’s ladder” is the stone under the Patriarch’s head, which in the Christian tradition assumes a Christological meaning.

Keywords: Bible, Book of Genesis, Jacob’s ladder, symbol, interpretation

The biblical episode known as the “Jacob’s ladder” has stimulated the imagination of Christians over the centuries and encouraged them to create symbolic associations that would give it new meanings in the changing existential contexts proper for interpreters.

Before we look at how the story from Genesis 28 fertilised the creative intuitions of writers from the circle of Western Christianity

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(Latin) up to Augustine,² let us examine what the symbol-creating specificity of the biblical narrative consists in.

1. Symbolic Potential of the Narrative About the “Jacob’s Ladder”

Let us start with a broader context. The episode of “Jacob’s ladder” fits into the narrative of the road. Jacob returns from Beersheba to Haran and stops for the night. So we have the horizontal dimension of wandering from one place to another, which is intertwined with the vertical dimension, which is represented by a ladder connecting what is above with what is beneath.

A tension between the dynamism of movement and the static of sleep is imposed on this horizontal-vertical structure. Jacob wanders, is on his way, similarly, angels from an oneiric vision ascend and descend the ladder. At the same time, however, we have a static structure: Jacob is in a dream and God stands still at the top of the ladder (Gen 28:13).

The motif of a dream is an important symbol-creating factor, because oneiric visions in every cultural context were the material for interpretation. The dream of the protagonist of the story introduces the reader into the space of signs and symbols, encouraging to manipulate them according to their own priorities.

The motif of sleep is combined with that of darkness. The biblical text clearly emphasizes “when the sun has already set” (v. 11). Darkness, in turn, introduces a space of mystery: there is something invisible, hidden, which the reader is to explain, reveal.

As far as material things are concerned, two motifs seem to come to the fore: a stone and a ladder. The motif of stone returns repeatedly in the pericope: “Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep” (v. 11),

² Some latest publications on the subject that are worth mentioning: N. Millin, *Stairway to Heaven: Jacob’s Ladder as Moral and Religious Instruction in early Medieval Ireland*, *The History Review* 17 (2013), pp. 92–115. In the introductory part, the author presents an outline of the Jewish history and Christian interpretation of the motif of the Jacob’s ladder. He dedicates pp. 97–100 to the Fathers of the Church, however, he puts emphasis on representatives of the Eastern tradition: Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom.

“in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar” (v. 18), “his stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house” (v. 22). The positive symbolism of the stone is connected with permanence, stability, immovability, which in the literary context of the pericope refers to the promises made by God in the above mentioned 13–15, while in the canonical context it may refer to the symbolism of God as a rock (Pss 18:32; 31:3–4; 62:3.7, *passim*) and especially Christ as the cornerstone (Matt 21:42) and the rock accompanying wandering Israelites from which spring water gushes (1 Cor 10:4).

The motif of the ladder contains numerous symbol-creating elements. Firstly, it is a factor connecting heaven and earth. It has a specific transcendent and paradoxical dimension. It is a “metaphysical” ladder which unites what is by nature radically separated. This aspect is further strengthened by the presence of angels (v. 12). Secondly, it is a space of communication, requiring effort, both to ascend and to descend. Thirdly, it is not without significance for Christian symbolism that the material of which the ladder is made is wood, which will evoke associations with other wooden objects, especially the Cross of Christ.

The theme of descending and ascending angels invites commentators to pick up the opposite movement: upward and downward, which in turn will have consequences in moral symbolism: upward movement symbolises growth and improvement, and downward movement symbolises fall and sinfulness.

Finally, perhaps less visible, there is the aspect of home space, especially in Jacob’s final statement: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (v. 17). Let us not forget that the ladder in ancient houses was one of the most necessary appliances. With the exception of massive buildings equipped with stairs, only a ladder could give access to the upper floors. If Jacob calls the place where he had the dream “the gate of heaven,” it is thanks to the ladder that it is possible to enter this house.

2. Ancient Symbolic Interpretations

The oldest allusion to the “Jacob’s ladder” in ancient Latin literature is found in the Martyrdom of St. Perpetua and Felicitia (Carthage, 203 CE). Vibia Perpetua, who is in prison, in anticipation of the martyrdom, sees in her sleep a bronze ladder (golden, according to some manuscripts) reaching to the sky, which can be climbed individually. From both sides one can see swords, spears and blades. At the foot of the ladder, there is a dragon (*draco*) lurking, which scares away from climbing, and on top of it the Saviour awaits. When Perpetua put her foot on the dragon’s head, as if on the first rung of the ladder, she immediately saw Christ in Paradise, surrounded by a crowd of saved persons dressed in white robes.³

It seems that the context of witness given by martyrdom conditioned the oldest symbolic interpretation of the episode of “Jacob’s ladder”, giving it the moral symbolism. Tertullian speaks in a similar spirit, when he writes explicitly that “the ladder about which Jacob dreamt means some ascending upwards and some descending downwards.”⁴ Obviously, the image of “angels ascending” symbolises martyrs, whereas those who descend are the so called *lapsi*, which means those who succumbed to the pressure of the persecutors and renounced Christ. In another place, while having a dispute with Marcion, he calls the “Jacob’s ladder” a way to heaven (*iter ad coelum*). Those who ascend it, reach (*perveniant*) the aim of salvation, while others fall down from it (*decidant*).⁵ Tertullian’s juxtaposition of “what is above” and “what is beneath” can have as its background Paul’s “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1).

In the writings of Ambrose of Milan, who, as we know, has formulated many symbolic interpretations for homiletical use, reference to the ladder (or steps: *scalae* – in Latin, defined by the same word) appears in the Commentary to the Twelve Psalms of

³ Cf. *Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, 1,3; PL 3, 25A–27A.

⁴ Tertullian, *De fuga in persecutione*, 1; PL 2, 103C–D; CCL 2, 1136.

⁵ Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 24; PL 2, 357A–B; CCL 1, 543.

David. He compares the ladder to Scripture, which encourages man to climb the steps (*gradus hos ascendere disciplinae*), and climbing a ladder itself means ascending in devotion (*pietatis ascensum*). Ambrose develops this idea, adding that the first step at its rungs is to refrain from sin, and the higher we climb, the further we move away from the earthly.⁶

In the posthumous speech in honour of Satyr, the bishop of Milan succinctly presents the symbolism of the ladder reaching up to the sky as an image of the cross of Christ, through which a future community (*futura consortia*) is achieved between angels descending from the sky and people ascending from the earth.⁷

In his polemical work against John of Jerusalem, Jerome evokes Origen's interpretation of the "Jacob's ladder" as an image of the hierarchy of rational creatures. The lowest step of the ladder is "flesh and blood," while ascending or descending is done by reincarnation (*mutare corpora*).⁸ Jerome does not seem to share this opinion, and

⁶ Ambrosius, *Enarrationes in XII Psalmos Davidicos*, 1,18; PL 14,929B–C.

⁷ Ambrosius, *De excessu fratris sui Satyrus*, 100; PL 16, 1244D–1344A. The tradition over the centuries has attributed Ambrose with the medieval Commentary to the Apocalypse, in which we find the original interpretation of the "Jacob's ladder." The anonymous author breaks down the ladder "to its constituent parts": it consists of two vertical wooden poles, which symbolise the two commandments of love of God and neighbour, and numerous transverse steps, marking individual virtues of Christian life. Moreover, the fact that the ladder touches the ground at its base and the top of heaven is a reminder that love begins on earth when it unites us with our neighbour and reaches heaven when it unites with God. (*Sicut scala ex una parte terram, ex altera coelum tangere visa est, ita et charitas ab inferioribus proximis, a superioribus vero Deo coniungitur*, Pseudo-Ambrosius, *Expositio in Apocalypsim*, 6,2; PL 17, 820D–821B). However, when the anonymous author talks about ascending and descending angels, he gives them a different meaning than in Tertullian. Both categories of angels, who symbolise saints, have a positive meaning: those who ascend, rise to the love of God through the grace of contemplation, while those who descend, lovingly bend over to the needs of others (820C). In the same commentary we find the interpretation of the stone on which Jacob rested his head. This stone symbolizes Christ, who according to 1 Cor 3:12 is the foundation of the spiritual building of Christian life. The commentator goes on to explain that if we put our head on this very stone, it means that we are building walls on Christ (according to the parable of the house on the rock in Matt 7:24–27) by doing good deeds.

⁸ Jerome, *Contra Joannem Hierosolymitanum*, 19; PL 23, 370B–C.

by giving the name of its author (*docet Origenes*), he places the responsibility its formulation with him.

Jerome advocates two symbolic interpretations of Jacob's vision. The first one refers to God's mercy and has been confirmed four times in the letters written by the Stridonian. In his letter to Furia, he evokes the image of angels ascending and descending the ladder reaching the sky, who symbolise God extending a helping hand to support the fallen.⁹ He included a similar thought in his letter to Eustochium, using the same phrase *porrigens manum* (extending his hand), but he also added the possibility of the opposite situation: God not only helps in the ascent, but also knocks down from the top of the ladder those who disregard His commandments (*et negligentes de sublimi praecipitans*).¹⁰ In the letter to Julian, the aspect is placed on the support given by God to the fallen to make an effort to climb,¹¹ and in the letter to Ageruchia, angels ascend and descend, so that "the sinner does not lose hope of salvation and the righteous man does not feel safe in his virtue" (*ut nec peccator desperet salute, nec justus in sua virtute securus sit*).¹²

Jerome's second interpretation is scriptural. Writing to Pope Damasius, Jerome explains that a ladder made up of two vertical poles connected by steps symbolises the close connection of the Old and New Testaments.¹³ Jerome does not develop this symbolism, but presents it in one sequence with other images with the same meaning, namely the pliers from Is 6:6, the double-edged sword from Heb 4:12, two coins of the widow from Mk and Lk 21:2, the stater found in the fish's mouth by Peter from Matthew 17:27, which is a tax for two people. The same symbolism is found in the Commentary to Ezekiel. Here, however, Jerome adds that the Jacob's ladder can also mean the cohesion of the Gospels, which touch the earth with one end and head towards heaven with the other.¹⁴

⁹ Jerome, *Epistola 54 ad Furiam*, 6; PL 22, 553; CSEL 54, 472.

¹⁰ Jerome, *Epistola 108 ad Eustochium*, 13; PL 22, 888; CSEL 55, 322.

¹¹ Jerome, *Epistola 118 ad Julianum*, 7; PL 22, 966; CSEL 55, 444.

¹² Jerome, *Epistola 123 ad Ageruchiam*, 15; PL 22, 1056–1057; CSEL 56, 90.

¹³ Jerome, *Epistola 18 ad Damasum*, 14; PL 22, 370; CSEL 54, 91.

¹⁴ Jerome, *Commentaria in Ezechielem*, ad 1,15; PL 25, 27D–28A; CCL 75, 20.

The interpretation of the vertical poles of the “Jacob’s ladder” as the New and Old Testament returns many times in the *Treatises* of Zeno of Verona. Its rungs are the evangelical commandments, the fulfilment of which makes it possible to rise up to heaven,¹⁵ or the individual virtues of the Christian life, which Zeno lists in the following order, starting from the lowest: conversion, obedience, reasonableness, trust, fear, wisdom, sobriety, gentleness, moderation, chastity, piety, love, faith, truth, humility, graciousness, honesty, truthfulness, patience, perseverance, perfection.¹⁶

In Zeno of Verona we also find the oldest reference of the “Jacob’s Ladder” to the cross of Christ. Zeno associates the image of the ladder with the words of Psalm 22:4 – “your stick and shepherd’s staff are my defence” – these *virga et baculus*, made of the same material as the ladder, when crossed, form the Saviour’s cross, thanks to which all mankind, starting with Adam, has an open path to heaven.¹⁷

Let us begin the Augustinian interpretation of the “Jacob’s ladder” with an interesting distinction, which we find in the commentary on Psalm 119. The Bishop of Hippo notes that it is possible (after Tertullian) to read positively the angels who ascend the ladder, and negatively those who descend. However, he himself is in favour of the positive symbolism of both (*forte melius intelliguntur omnes boni in illis scalis, et ascendentes et descendentes*).¹⁸ To support his position, he adds that they do not “fall” from the ladder, but “descend.” They do not act like Adam, who “fell” (*cecidit*), but like Christ, who “descended” (*descendit*).

The second characteristic of Augustine’s interpretation is the close link between the episode we are discussing in Genesis and the text of Jn 1:51: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son

¹⁵ Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus 13*, 1; PL 11, 428A; CCL 22, 101.

¹⁶ Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus 13*, 5; PL 11, 433A–B; CCL 22, 104.

¹⁷ Zeno of Verona, *Tractatus 13*, 3.5; PL 11, 431A–B.433B; CCL 22, 102.104.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmo 119*, 2; PL 37, 1598; CCL 40, 1778.

of Man.”¹⁹ In interpreting the image of the angels ascending and descending, Augustine gives them a symbolic meaning as preachers of the Gospel. The first of them are the Evangelists. They ascend to heaven when they preach: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1), and they descend when they teach that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14)²⁰ and “was born of woman, born under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law” (Gal 4:5).²¹ In particular, St Paul the Apostle is the preacher of the Gospel. He ascends upwards in words: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor 12:2–4), and he descends he writes: “I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food” (1 Cor 3,1–2).²² Augustine also quotes the sentence of St. Paul twice: “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (2 Cor 5:13), the first part of which expresses ascension, while the second one – descent.²³

The dynamics of ascent and descent are present in the Church when Christians ascend towards its head, which is Christ, and descend to the lowest of her members.²⁴ This is beautifully illustrated by the Bishop of Hippo with the image of a mother who leans over her child and a father who, even if he was “a great speaker whose voice would tear the forums and shake the tribunals” (*sit tantus orator ut lingua illius fora concrepent et tribunalia*

¹⁹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 16,38,2; PL 41, 517; CCL 48, 544; *Enarrationes in Psalmo 44*, 20; PL 36, 507; CCL 38, 509; *Sermones de Scripturis*, 89,5; 122,2,2; 122,5,5; PL 38,557.681.683; *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 26; PL 42,268; *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 7,23; PL 35, 1449–1450; CCL 36, 80–81.

²⁰ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmo 44*, 20; PL 36, 507; CCL 38, 509.

²¹ Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 26; PL 42, 268.

²² Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 7,23; PL 35, 1449; CCL 36, 80.

²³ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmo 44*, 20; PL 36, 507; CCL 38, 509; *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 26; PL 42, 268.

²⁴ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmo 44*, 20; PL 36, 507; CCL 38, 509.

concutiantur), yet “if he has a tiny son, having returned home, he abandons the eloquent speech with which he ascended, so that with the childish tongue he can descend towards his baby” (*si habeat parvulum filium, cum ad domum redierit, deponit forensem eloquentiam quo ascenderat, et lingua puerili descendit ad parvulum*).²⁵

Augustine also draws attention to the last words of Jn 1:51: “angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” In the episode of the “Jacob’s ladder” the stone at the foot of the ladder on which the Patriarch rested his head is a prophetic announcement of Christ. Our commentator points out that in the story from the book of Genesis “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” (Gen 28:18). The gesture of pouring the oil, or anointing, evokes the etymology of the word Christ, that is “Anointed,” which is why this stone symbolizes Jesus.²⁶ Thus, on the principle of reminiscence, he juxtaposes the motif of the stone from the episode of Jacob’s dream with the quotation from Ps 118:22 (“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone”),²⁷ with Is 28:16 (“Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation sin Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: Whoever believes will not be in haste”), giving them a Christological meaning, and from the New Testament he quotes 1 Pet 2:4 (“He is a living stone, rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious”).

Hilary of Poitiers, who refers to the motif of the Jacob’s ladder in his work about the Holy Trinity, is worth adding to the list of the authors discussed above.²⁸ There he presents the story of the Patriarch’s dream as one of the episodes of the Old Testament which should be interpreted as an evangelical anticipation. In this sense he

²⁵ Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 7,23; PL 35, 1449; CCL 36, 81.

²⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 16,38,2; PL 41, 517; CCL 48, 544; *Enarrationes in Psalmo 44*, 20; PL 36, 507; CCL 38, 509; *Sermones de Scripturis*, 89,5; PL 38, 557; *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 26; PL 42, 268; *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 7,23; PL 35, 1449; CCL 36, 80.

²⁷ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmo 44*, 20; PL 36, 507; CCL 38, 509.

²⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, 5,20; CCL 62, 170–171.

persuades the addressees of his work that God sitting at the top of the ladder is the same as Jesus Christ.²⁹ However, Hilary's interpretation does not contain symbolic elements and consequently we treat it marginally.

3. Conclusion

The episode from the book of Genesis about the "Jacob's ladder" inspired many symbolic interpretations in ancient Christianity. Most often we encounter symbolism of a moral nature, which basically proceeds in two directions. Following Tertullian, "descending angels" symbolise sinners, while those "ascending" symbolise righteous people. Following Augustine, on the other hand, "those who descend" mean those who bend over to the needs of others, while the "ascending" mean those who direct their hearts to God.

For Jerome, the ascending and descending angels symbolise not so much people as the mercy of God, who is descending towards the sinner, while for Ambrose and Zeno of Verona, the ladder represents the Old and New Testaments, and its rungs represent the individual virtues of Christian life.

An important literary motif in the story of the "Jacob's ladder" is the stone under the Patriarch's head, which in the Christian tradition takes on a Christological meaning.

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²⁹ Ibid.: "Filius ex alio viso Iacob Deus verus ostenditur. Deus non intelligitur nisi per Deum. Tenet adhuc sacramenti evangelici ordinem legis umbra, et apostolicae doctrinae veritatem mysteriis suis veri aemula praefigurat."

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