

Jacob's Ladder, Stairway to Heaven

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What really happened when Jacob fell asleep and dreamed of a ladder to Heaven in the book of Genesis? Does the sleep of Jacob bear any relation to the sleep of other Biblical heroes? Why is Jacob's ladder so important to us as Christians?

Jacob's Ladder has become a part of our culture, even in the secular world it has seen usage in movies and music. But what really takes place there is critical to Salvation History and understanding our place in the Kingdom of God. Genesis 28 begins with Jacob leaving the land of promise with the blessing of his father Isaac. In the previous chapter Jacob has fulfilled his name (The Supplanter) by manipulating his brother Esau's birthright away from him. Jacob uses an instrument of the devil in that he deceives his father by means of food. In many ways the story of Jacob in Gen. 28 is a strong allusion to the Garden of Eden. Cain and Abel are now seen in Jacob and Esau who struggle for the birthright to be Firstborn, The High Priest and pre-eminent one of the People of God. Jacob, much like Abel, both born second in the order of the world become the Firstborn of the LORD.

Jacob is in hot pursuit of the blessing, so he can be the promised seed of Gen. 3:15. In addition to this he knows that the firstborn will inherit the blessing of Abraham. Obtaining the Blessing is a major theme in this passage. After stealing the blessing from his brother, Jacob is forced to leave the land of promise because of his brother's jealousy. Just as Cain resented Abel for being the second born, gaining the preference of the first born, so Esau hates his brother.

As Jacob leaves the land and pursues the blessing, he is sent to find the right woman. Jacob forbids him to marry Canaanite women. Finding the "right woman" is extremely important in Genesis and the rest of Scripture. Pursuit of the Bride and finding the Right Woman are the very heart and soul of Genesis and the Gospels. The Book of Revelation resounds with these two critical types. The ultimate promise and seed would have to come through the Right Woman because Adam was cursed in his total posterity (seed) but the woman, only in her person. Hence the promise of blessing is through the Seed of the Woman. The Right Woman theme begins with Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel and continues throughout Scripture where it culminates in our Lady, Mary of Nazareth.

As Jacob heads north to find the true bride, his brother takes counterfeit brides. He marries several women who do not make the covenantal grade. The last wife he takes is descendent from Hagar the Egyptian. Jacob will get the bride of promise and Esau attaches his hope to the physical firstborn.

As Jacob sets out with the blessing of Abraham passed on to him by Isaac, he rests in a "special place" and has a dream. God appears to Jacob by means of a ladder with angels ascending and descending on it. The LORD appears to Jacob and confirms/reestablishes the covenant He made with Abraham. Jacob will inherit and return to the land of promise. He is given land and seed. God's presence has been manifested to man once again in this "special place"; some translations (NAB, TEV) call the place a "shrine". These are excellent translations since this is where Abraham first camped and built an altar to worship God (Gen. 12:8). So when God appears to the heir of Abraham it is in the same place that Abraham first worshiped the LORD in the Land. Jacob says that this place is the House of God and the Gate of Heaven. God was manifested to man and worship occurs again. It is the first place that Jacob, the seed of Abraham, worships the LORD. Jacob builds an Altar, blesses it, and worships God with a vow and tithes (the first mention of a vow in Scripture).

"Jacob's Ladder" is for Jacob a vision and encounter with the God of the Covenant. When man encounters God, worship occurs, Heaven and earth meet. The gap between Creator and created is shown to be joined. Jacob now knows that the God of his fathers is

with him. It is God who ascends and descends, it is God who establishes and lovingly continues His Covenant. This Theophany, an appearing of God, is a type of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. For Christ ultimately will descend to earth, becomes the messenger and message of the New Covenant and will ascend back up to heaven.

In Christ, Heaven and Earth meet. Jesus mentions this passage in the Gospel of John and is vividly pictured by Luke in *The Acts of the Apostles*. As Jesus ascends, angels are seen interacting with men telling them how react to God's presence among men.

Jacob changes the name of the place from Luz to Bethel. The name Luz means fruit bearing tree (most likely Almond). This is an allusion of the Garden of Eden and the "Tree Encounter" theme that runs throughout Scripture. The LORD once again manifests Himself at a fruit-bearing tree for blessing and worship.

Compare this and other tree encounters with Nathaniel's encountering God in the flesh at a fruit-bearing tree in the land of Israel. Christ used this tree encounter to manifest himself to this disciple. Nathaniel immediately caught the significance and the parallel to the incarnational nature of this "tree encounter". Trees become places of meeting the LORD of Creation and therefore places of worship in the Bible. Nathaniel was probably meditating or praying under the fig tree when he really started communicating with God face to face. Hence the strong allusion to fruit bearing trees and blessing in *The Book of Revelation*, corresponding to the presence of God.

In the Tridentine Mass, some of the first words of the priest as he approaches the Altar and the Cross are in reference to the fruits from the Ultimate Tree of Life giving Life to the World.

The name change theme will occur many times throughout Holy Scripture. Jacob will return to Bethel during a time of trial and transition. This becomes a holy place for Jacob, where he will encounter the LORD at a fruit-bearing tree and worship the Almighty in the place where God descended to meet with man.