

JACOB'S LADDER

July 20, 2008

Genesis 28: 10-1

Jacob's ladder may indeed be the world's most famous dream. It is renowned in song and children's games and strategic models and light formations and so familiar was it that I had forgotten what it was all about to begin with. Before we get to the marvelous dream itself, it's worthwhile examining the dreamer for a minute.

Jacob is not an admirable character. He is a liar and a cheat who comes into the world by dint of holding onto his older brother, Esau's, heel. He is a mama's boy who by stealth and deceit take both Esau's birthright and their father, Isaac's blessing, resulting in the wrongful distribution of a substantial inheritance upon Isaac's death. In other words, Jacob gets it all. Not surprisingly, Esau is filled with rage and vows to kill Jacob, so Jacob, helped by his doting mother Rebekah, goes on the lam.

That's when he has the dream, and what a wonderful dream it is: "Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." And God goes on to tell Jacob that the land belongs to him and that He will bless and protect him and his descendents and this land forever. This promise the conniving Jacob receives in very characteristic manner, for he bargains with God, saying something like, well, if you will feed and clothe and protect me, then I'll honor you in return.

Now, here's the conundrum: Jacob is a bad guy. He's not even a tragically or dramatically bad guy; he's just your run-of-the-mill sneaky, smarmy, untrustworthy, weasely kind of guy. So, why does he get the big dream? Why does he get the big promise?

Lots of scholars talk about this dream and it engenders many literary allusions. One scholar of the Hebrew Bible says that excavation have found the remnants of an actual stairway not far from where Jacob must have lain down to sleep, and that this stairway had two sets of steps, one, it is assumed, for ascent and one for descent. Presumably Jacob was familiar with this design and it would be in his visual memory.

But this dream has angels ascending and descending and angels are wonderfully inexplicable beings. They can represent pure spirit; they can represent messengers from God; they can be an abstract figure of the imagination, of creativity and the aesthetic sense; a being somewhere between humankind and the ineffable. They are so transcendental that speaking of angels is almost to have an exhalation of bliss. Poets speak of them all the time, as do prophets. To be in the presence of angels is to be taken from the physical to the spiritual.

And the angels ascend and descend a ladder and the ladder is resting on the earth and rising up to heaven. Thus the ladder is the intermediary between our physical, pragmatic life here on earth and the transcendent life of heaven. Our biblical scholar tells that the ladder “helps us climb above the mundane from time to time to bring back with us this angelic perspective when we descend again into our daily lives. The angels represent our emotions that in some cases raise us up toward our aspiration and in other cases drag us down in the other direction.”* It is up to us to climb that ladder when it is available to us, to allow ourselves to remain open to the possibility of the inspiration and grace at its top. In some sense, this is what prayer is – a stillness of the heart and mind that inclines us toward the possibility of the ascent of that ladder should it appear to us.

We all know how easy it is to ignore the possibility in exchange for our habits of involvement in the needs of the everyday, to attend to the laundry or the vacuuming or the email, is, after all, such a useful distraction. Though Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* speaks not of ladders and of angels, it touches on the same issue, when Brutus says, “There is a tide in the affairs of men/ Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;/ Omitted, all the voyage of their life/ is bound in shallows and in miseries.” Brutus is speaking of the fortunes of war and not of creative inspiration and of grace; nonetheless, the same notion of opportunity waiting to be taken can be applied to Jacob’s ladder – climb when it is possible.

More to the point is William Butler Yeats’ poem, *The Circus Animals Desertion*, in which the poet laments the absence of creative revelation. He works on it and works on it, trying all the old tricks that he is used to relying upon, but it all seems stale and hackneyed. His mind searches through his repertoire of themes and characters, and he realizes that what he has left is merely the symbols of the dream that was once there. He says, “Players and painted stage took all my love,” though he realizes that “It was the dream itself enchanted me.” At the end of the poem he determines that he must put aside all this intellectual searching and wait for inspiration from the heart. He says, “Now that my ladder’s gone, / I must lie down where all the ladders start/ In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.” Yeats’ poem is his lesson’s own fulfillment – presumably he did lie down in the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart” and as a result, he wrote this beautiful poem. And so it must be for all of us; we must wait for the ladder with our heart as it is – not so pure, not so good, not so smart – but ours, and if the ladder shows up, we must climb it or else lose it. And, even so, we will very likely never write a poem like Yeats’.

There’s one more thing that we have to remember about this ladder and that is that there are angels both ascending and descending - from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth. In other words, Paradise is not a roach motel with a one-way entrance. We can be possessed of grace and of inspiration and of revelation and we can also lose it. We will all remember, especially in this the year of Milton’s 400th birthday, that even angels fall, as perhaps most famously in *Paradise Lost*

In the end we can learn from Jacob’s dream that the possibility of that ladder and its ascent is open to all of us. Even a conniver such as Jacob, even from “the foul rag and bone shop of the

heart”, we can have the hope of the open, free and sunlit meadows of grace and inspiration. We have no reason to expect that it will come automatically and, indeed, some people no doubt struggle their whole life and never have this experience. Yet, none of us are excluded from the possibility.

The dream of the ladder, the possibility of ascending it, the vision of heaven above, all of this is a gift, freely given and with no strings attached to it. Though we see Jacob trying to bargain with God, we know that it is an irrelevant attempt, just another illustration of Jacob’s singular lack of virtue – the gift is there regardless of how he responds to it. We can’t work for it; we can’t figure out ways for it to happen; we just have to be ready. Yeats knew this when he said that he had to just wait for his heart even if it was a rag and bone shop.

Those blessed by grace know that it is rarely a permanent state; rather it is more often celebrated by its memory and longed for in its absence. Jacob’s dream acknowledges this in that the angels are both descending and ascending to heaven. In fact, some punster interpreters of this Biblical passage have said that one must read for ascend (going up), also assent (accept) and for descend (going down), one must read also dissent (deny). Thus, in order to participate in the dream, should that ladder actually appear, one must accept it and give oneself to it. We cannot say, “I’m too busy right now. Call me tomorrow.” We have to be ready to climb those stairs. And when we can’t accept it anymore, when we have to go back to that laundry and that vacuuming, that’s when we’re denying and going back down the stairs again. That’s why people spend time in prayer and meditation; that’s why writers and artists go off to their studios, even if it’s only a studio of the mind. It’s to wait for the ladder and to be ready to climb when it comes.

Jacob’s dream can come to all of us, no matter how impoverished of spirit we may feel, but we cannot turn away. We have to “use it or lose it.” Jacob, despite his less than noble character, did not turn over in his stony bed and bid the dream to go away so that he could get some sleep. He was properly awed by it and realized its import. Sometimes those ancients were so much smarter than we.

*Curzon, David: *The View From Jacob’s Ladder*