

The Ladder of Love

THERE IS IN THE BOOK of Genesis (28:12) a little story telling of a vision seen by the patriarch Jacob at the time when he was fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau, whom he had deceived and betrayed. The verse reads “And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached unto heaven: and, behold, the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”

Like many another biblical story, it is short and concise, and like many another also, it receives little serious study, perhaps on account of its shortness. At the same time, when one does study these stories they are found to contain a surprising wealth of meaning and of wisdom. We are apt to take the superficial view and to dismiss the matter with the thought that it is a nice story and no doubt did show Jacob that God was watching over him, even in spite of his wrong doing. So we let it go at that.

A check on the Hebrew words used here, together with their alternate meanings, gives a much clearer light on the story. The word “ladder,” for instance, is a word that comes from a root word meaning “mounting upward,” and could well be rendered “staircase” or even better still “steep upward pathway,” the word “ladder” having been chosen by the translators apparently as fitting their own mental picture. Again, the word “angels” is translatable in other ways. The word “angel” itself means simply “messenger” and does not of necessity always apply to what we call the angelic life wave. In this case, alternate translations given in *Strong’s Concordance* include “messengers,” “prophets,” and “teachers,” and this last word seems to open up the meaning most clearly.

What, then, is this “ladder?” Ladder, staircase, or ascending pathway, whichever translation we choose, all give the same picture of a steep and

straight way between earth and heaven; the “strait and narrow way” of Christ Jesus, “which leadeth unto life.” In other words, Jacob saw a vision of the Path of Initiation, perhaps the first such vision given to men, other than individual initiation given to those who received this honor in the early days, and whom we now generally call our Elder Brothers. It becomes quite plain, therefore, when regarded in this way, that Jacob was shown the path to which he must aspire, even though we do not find him attempting to follow that path at that time.

The question then arises, just who was Jacob? Why should he be given such a vision? On the material plane he was a man of perhaps normally good character for his time, but one who had the very common fault of dishonesty, for we are told that he deceived his brother and robbed him of his birthright. But, since these stories also carry a hidden spiritual meaning—an allegorical meaning, as Paul says—we may find a very different picture from that of the doings of one individual. The name *Jacob* is generally rendered as meaning “supplanter;” literally, it is “heel-catcher,” or one who trips up another in order to overcome him by unfair means. This is, of course, exactly what the individual Jacob had done, and the name was very fitting. Still, on the broader side, we see that Jacob, the man, stands for unregenerate humanity. He is still clinging to his lower nature, still unrepentant of his sins. Deceptiveness is, we must admit, one of the very commonest of human faults. Basic honesty is none too common, and we still find people exclaiming in surprise when someone has the courage to stand for absolute integrity. Perhaps we had better not criticize the old Jacob too harshly!

Although Jacob had seen the vision of the ladder, he was not yet prepared to begin its ascent. He still had his great fault unconquered; he still had not

learned to feel the pangs he caused others by his deceptions. So we find him fleeing, not so much perhaps from the wrath of Esau, as from his own guilty fears, to a far distant country to take refuge with his uncle Laban. Like the Prodigal, he fled into the depths of materiality trying to get away from himself. Now came his lesson. For seven years he served for the one he loved, Rachel, only to find himself tricked in his turn, for Laban reneged on his bargain and offered Leah instead. Jacob then had to serve a further symbolic seven years before gaining his heart's desire. He must have been, as later events showed, endeavoring during this time to overcome his great fault, but that he had only partially succeeded is shown by the fact that he, in turn, continued to trick his uncle until at last his conscience, which perhaps was becoming aroused, drove him away. Then he received another sharp lesson, for we find his beloved Rachel herself caught in deceit and dishonesty.

However, this time Jacob is able to mend matters with his uncle, and he continues back towards his home with the determination to make what restitution he can to the deceived and defrauded brother. In this he was successful, for we find Esau, who had himself overcome his hatred and resentment, willing and anxious to forgive.

Now comes Jacob's great test. He wrestles for a whole night with a man; he has approached the threshold and evidently must wrestle with his own lower nature, or with that self-created demon, the Dweller on the Threshold. He has so far conquered this lower nature that he succeeds in vanquishing his demon, whereupon it now appears as an angel of light, and he is set upon the ladder at last. However, his victory is not complete for he bears the scar of the battle, the lameness induced by the touch of the demon, for the rest of his life. Since he has overcome to a large extent his lower nature, and since his higher nature, now aroused, has become dominant, his name is changed. The old sins are wiped out and with them the name of "supplanter." Instead he is given the new name of Israel—"he shall rule as a God."

Is not this story typical of the experiences of every aspiring soul? At some point in our development we see the vision of the ladder. Then we begin to strive to overcome whatever it is that is our own

particular fault, for even those of good character still have their own particular weaknesses. The lessons are learned, often through bitter suffering and disappointment. The way is often dark and lonely, for we are far from our heavenly home, enmeshed in material things. But in time, with the memory of the vision ever before us, we are inspired to keep on striving, and eventually reach the goal of self-conquest, which is the true initiation.

It is very comforting to know that it is not necessary for us to attain perfection before receiving initiation. Jacob still carried the mark of his weakness; he must still strive to overcome, and so must everyone who aspires to climb this ladder. It is the willingness, the progress through continued effort, that counts.

We have called this "The Ladder of Love," and truly this is shown in Jacob's vision. Angels, Great Ones of some order, possibly our Elder Brothers, are seen both ascending and descending. What does this mean? Surely, we say, those who have attained to the point where they are able to climb do not need to come down again! No, they do not need to return. Then why do they do so? For love, of course. Those who have attained have done so because of their compassion and love for their fellow men, as well as for all other of God's creatures. So, putting aside their own desires, back they come for the sole purpose of helping the rest of us upward on this ladder of initiation, at what cost to themselves we may only guess. And we must do likewise; even as we struggle up the steep road for the first time, we must be prepared to step back many times in order to help some other upward, just as those Greater Ones have helped and are helping us. So, and only so, may we individually and as a race hope to attain to the godlikeness that is our destiny.

Our individual efforts in thus helping forward our race may seem very small and puny, yet collectively they form a force of tremendous power. All are striving towards the goal of goodwill and peace, even though all still have the evils of hatred and resentment to overcome. Jacob's vision still points out the path and, some day, we as individuals, and as nations, will all attain to that point where, as Jacobs and Esaus, we shall again be united in love and fellowship. □

—Jack L. Burt