

JACOB'S LADDER

By Mary Anderson

It is related in the book of Genesis, in the Old Testament of the Bible, how Jacob, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, when wandering in the desert, lay down to sleep, taking stones for a pillow: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached the heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (Gen., 28:12). "And, behold, the Lord stood above it . . ." (ibid., 28:13).

The whole description—the ladder, the angels climbing up and down the ladder and the Lord standing above—may suggest many symbolic interpretations in connection with Theosophical teachings and a Theosophical life.

What teachings might be involved? We may think of the following:

1. "Creation" — a divine outpouring
2. Evolution
3. The kingdoms of Nature
4. Reincarnation
5. The human constitution
6. Human progress
7. The spiritual path
8. The significance of dreams in general
9. The omnipresence of the Divine

Let us consider each of these points one by one:

1. "Creation" — A Divine Outpouring

According to Theosophical teachings, the origin of our universe was ONE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE, which may be called God, the Absolute, the Ground of Being, Parabrahman, etc. This may be symbolized by the Lord in Jacob's dream, standing at the top of the ladder. The One Divine Principle poured forth two aspects of itself, being the origin of what we call Spirit or Consciousness and Matter. This outpouring may be represented by the angels descending the ladder. Being aspects of the ONE, Spirit / Consciousness and Matter are always connected, but their connection consists in Spirit / Consciousness being first wrapped up in or stifled by matter. This is known as "involution."

2. Evolution

“Evolution” means literally “unrolling” from the Latin words *ex*, meaning out, and *volvere*, to roll. But if something is unrolled, it must have been rolled up beforehand. If we unroll a scarf round our neck or a bandage round our finger, we must have rolled them up in the first place. In the same way, evolution implies involution, “rolling in” or “rolling up,” before “unrolling” or e-volution can take place. Involution or spirit / consciousness becoming “involved” in matter may be symbolized by the angels descending the ladder, and the movement of the angels up the ladder would symbolize evolution, spirit / consciousness freeing itself from matter.

3. The Kingdoms of Nature

Evolution takes place through the different Kingdoms of Nature, which we can symbolize, as does Geoffrey Barborika in *The Divine Plan*, as the rungs of a ladder, representing the various kingdoms (beginning at the bottom): mineral, plant, animal, human, and superhuman. So the same life, consciousness, or spirit ascends the ladder, passing through these kingdoms of Nature, over immense periods of time.

Thus there is continuous movement down and then up the ladder, spirit / consciousness penetrating ever deeper into matter or descending the ladder, and then gradually freeing itself from the bonds of matter and ascending the ladder.

4. Reincarnation

We may also be reminded of the downward and upward movements of our incarnations, our lives, and deaths: our descent into matter, into a physical body at birth, and our ascent into realms of finer matter after we leave the body at death. Goethe wrote a beautiful poem expressing this:

The soul of man is like water
It comes from heaven
It rises to heaven
And once again
It must return to earth
In constant change

Our lives on earth and sojourns in a heavenly realm can be compared to day and night, summer and winter, the ebb and flow of the tide—and the appearance and disappearance of universes. The First Fundamental Proposition in *The Secret Doctrine* states that the manifested universe is pervaded by duality, such as light and darkness, hot and cold, etc. and the constant movement from one extreme to the other is called in the Second Fundamental Proposition “the law of periodicity.” Thus the angels

climbing down and up the ladder in Jacob's dream may represent those movements in Nature in which all creatures engage.

5. The Constitution of a Human Being

In this respect, *we* are Jacob's ladder. The ladder of our being stretches from Spirit at the top of the ladder, so to speak, where the Lord stands in the biblical story, through spiritual insight, Wisdom, and Love (*buddhi*), through the intellect (*manas*) united in its higher aspect (*buddhi-manas*) with Wisdom and Love or in its lower aspect (*kāma-manas*) with our emotions, our desires, our selfishness, and then down to the physical body.

Mounting the ladder would mean that our consciousness rises from the physical level to the so-called astral or emotional level, where most dreaming takes place, up to higher and more spiritual levels, where certain prophetic dreams may be dreamed, as in Jacob's case. We stand consciously on the ladder generally at the physical, emotional, and mental levels, but the other levels are present, though mostly unconsciously. They exist; they are facts in Nature. In theory they are accessible at any moment. We may climb the ladder within at any moment. We perhaps mount and descend the lower rungs of that ladder all the time. Former President N. Sri Ram compares the human being to a rope hanging down, like a rope ladder. On that rope there are seven knots, like the rungs of a ladder, each knot representing one of the seven human principles. Mme Blavatsky points out that all seven principles are present in us, but that normally each principle develops fully only over a vast period of time. But when we feel great devotion or aspiration, we may reach upwards and perhaps mount a rung of the ladder and one may say that then an angel of grace or inspiration descends to meet us.

6. Human Progress

The ascent of the ladder may symbolize the path of humanity itself from stages of complete innocence, ignorance, and inactivity — *tāmasic* stages — through stages of activity, passion, materialism, and even violence — *rājasic* stages — rising finally to the stage of harmony, peace, love, and wisdom: *sattva*.

Are we aided in our ascent? Do helping hands stretch down from above? Perhaps only in so far as we aid those behind us to rise by stretching a helping hand down to them. A story is told of a certain lady who was very mean, but who once gave a carrot to a beggar. After her death, that carrot carried her heavenwards. But many poor souls attached themselves to the hem of her dress in order also to ascend to heaven. She did not feel their weight, but then she looked back and was very angry when she saw them all. So she shook them off. But, in shaking them off, she let go of the carrot and lost her only chance of salvation.

Of course, we all pass through stages of grasping and possessiveness, but we shall have other opportunities, until we learn to share and to give.

7. The Spiritual Path

The ladder may represent the culmination of human evolution, the spiritual path leading to perfection, leading beyond the human stage. There is a reference to the spiritual path as a ladder in *The Voice of the Silence*:

The ladder by which the candidate ascends is formed of rungs of suffering and pain . . . Woe, then, to thee, disciple, if there is one single vice thou hast not left behind. For then the ladder will give way and overthrow thee . . . Beware lest thou shouldst set a foot still soiled upon the ladder's lowest rung. (v. 69)

The spiritual life is often also referred to as a path or a stream or a staircase, for example, *The Golden Stairs*. A ladder is, like a staircase, an appropriate symbol, because it suggests that, in order to reach the top of the ladder, we must climb, we must make an effort, we must persist. A ladder, like a staircase, is not an escalator or a lift, much less a mountain railway, which carries us to the top, our destination, our goal, be it the next floor or the mountain top. We must work in order to get there. (The angels may have the privilege of ascending and descending the ladder apparently effortlessly, but not humanity! Yet it is said that the angels must all, some day in the future, pass through the human kingdom, or have already done so in the past.)

8. What of Dreams in General?

Jacob saw the ladder in a dream. In Hindu philosophy the state of dreaming or trance consciousness is known as *svapna*, the second of the states of consciousness or *avāstha*; the first being *jāgrat* or waking consciousness; while the third, *sushupti*, corresponds to dreamless sleep. Finally, the fourth state, *turiya*, is the transcendental stage, beyond anything we can imagine.

Mme Blavatsky points out that there are different kinds of dreams: prophetic, allegorical, those sent by adepts (good or bad), retrospective dreams, warning dreams for others, confused dreams, fancies or chaotic pictures due to indigestion, some mental trouble, or other external cause (*HPB Teaches*, p. 433 et seq.).

She also mentions that "no advanced Adept dreams . . . A dream . . . is an illusion" (idem., p. 433). Krishnamurti said that he never dreamt. From a higher vantage point, dreams are illusory . . . as some day our present life on earth or the present *manvantara* may seem to us. The following words from Shakespeare's *Tempest* (IV.i) could refer to the end of a *manvantara* or any period of activity:

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air.
And, like the baseless factor of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself.
Yea, all which it inherits, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep . . .

At our present imperfect stage, dreams are often attempts to finish unfinished business, to solve problems left unsolved during the day. For this reason, some modern psychologists, probably beginning with Freud, have paid great attention to dreams. C. G. Jung and others have pointed out their importance, and with the help of sympathy and intuition have been able to pinpoint problems and their causes which had been suppressed by their patients, leading to confusion, depression, and mental illness. In many cases, cures were effected, when the patients, who had to do much of the work themselves, realized and accepted what they had suppressed and what had emerged in dreams.

9. The Omnipresence of the Divine

This is perhaps the most inspiring lesson which Jacob's dream has for us.

I quote from a book whose author was familiar with and impressed by Jacob's dream at an early age (Laurens van der Post, *Jung and the Story of our Time*):

This dream . . . begins by defining . . . what the dreaming process is . . . declaring simply that it is the way between life and its ultimate meaning.

For that, I believe, is what the image of the ladder and its positioning between Heaven and earth is intended to convey. It asserts that through it men and the source of their meaning will, forever, be in communication. That is what I suspect the traffic of angels on the ladder represents since angels are messengers . . . (p. 8)

In other words, we are always potentially in touch with the Infinite, but we do not realize it.

No matter how abandoned and without help either in themselves or the world about them, the dream, using Jacob's state and the great and perilous wasteland through which he is fleeing in fear of his life, as

imagery of man at the end of his resources, affirms that man is never alone . . .

And Jacob did not even have to ask for help . . . the dream brought him instant promise of help from the sources of creation itself . . . (pp. 8–9)

Moreover, it is pointed out that the traffic of spirit is a two-way affair, as the angels are not only descending from above, but also ascending the ladder. Thus symbolically a dialogue is possible between God and man, meaning that the Divine is always accessible. After all, our inmost nature is divine. A genuine appeal to the Divine, which is ultimately within us, never goes unheard (though this leaves room for self-deceit). Thus, the poet Francis Thompson could write:

Cry, and upon thy sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt heaven and Charing Cross

Charing Cross, in the midst of the busy city of London, and heaven, with its angelic hosts . . . what could seem more different, more opposed to each other? But the Divine is everywhere, not only in a temple, a mosque, or a church, but in the busy streets of a teeming capital city. So much depends on us. Again, Francis Thompson expresses this appropriately:

The angels keep their ancient places
Turn but a stone, you start a wing
'Tis you, 'tis your estranged faces
That miss the many-splendoured thing

The dream may convey the realization that Jacob's ladder is always there, even though we are mostly not aware of it. The angels, the messengers of the Lord, of *Ātmā*, of the Divine, are always there. We are never alone, perhaps least so when we feel most alone.

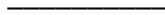
There is a familiar story of a man who was walking with God on the seashore. Suddenly he felt he was alone. On looking back, he could see two sets of footprints on the sand for a certain distance. Then he saw only what he took to be his own footprints. He asked in despair: "Where were you, Lord, when I was walking alone?" And the answer came: "I was carrying you."

As Mme Blavatsky pointed out, we live in a world of duality. The relatively good and the relatively evil exist in the world of duality—a world of illusion, which does not mean that we can defy the laws of that world, for we are part of it. Our present conscious self which is conscious in that world is also illusory, in that it is not our true spiritual self. But this illusory world—or rather, perhaps, only relatively real world—is

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a reflection of what is absolutely real. It is at the bottom of the ladder which we are ascending.

It may help us to realize the deceptive nature of the world of duality and to begin to ascend Jacob's ladder if we recognize the illusory nature of many of the dualities we create or support when we speak of good and evil, light and darkness, etc. especially if we use these terms to criticize others. We cannot seek unity only vertically, that is, unity with our deeper nature, without also seeking it horizontally, with our fellow human beings.



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