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Renaissance Interpretations of Jacob's Ladder

Πρὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν διὰ τῆς κλίμακος τοῦ Ἰακώβ

In *Paradise Lost*, as Satan journeys toward Eden, he suddenly beholds

Ascending by degrees magnificent
Up to the wall of Heaven a Structure high,
At top whereof, but farr more rich appeerd
The work as of a Kingly Palace Gate
With Frontispiece of Diamond and Gold
Imbellisht; thick with sparkling orient Gemmes
The Portal shon, inimitable on Earth
By Model, or by shading Pencil drawn.
The Stairs were such as whereon *Jacob* saw
Angels ascending and descending, bands
Of Guardians bright, when he from *Esau* fled
To *Padan-Aram* in the field of *Luz*,
Dreaming by night under the opn Skie,
And waking cri'd, This is the Gate of Heav'n¹.

If Satan was impressed, the same cannot be said of our scholars. The most obvious Biblical source—Gen. 28:10–15—has, of course, been mentioned repeatedly; to which might be added an ineffectual effort to enlist the possible influence of Bodin², and the more recent argument that Jacob's Ladder has a more “intimate” relationship with the rest of Milton's poem than critics have hitherto recognized³. As against our relative lack of interest, however, the *Renaissance* attended to the figure with characteristic thoroughness. An impressive series of *commentators* expended much time and energy in ex-

¹ J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III, 502–515. Two other “scales” mentioned in the epic: the Scale of Nature (V, 469ff.) and the Scale of Love (VIII, 589ff.).

² D. C. Allen, Two Notes on *Paradise Lost*: *Modern Language Notes* 68 (1953), p. 360, claimed that Bodin—in his *Heptaplomeres*—and Milton alike identify Jacob's Ladder with the Homeric Chain (mentioned in *Par. Lost*. II, 1004–6). But a closer reading of the epic has revealed no such identification on Milton's part; see Harry F. Robbins, *Milton's Golden Chain*: *Modern Language Notes* 69 (1954), p. 76.

³ George W. Whiting, *Milton and this Pendant World* (1958), Ch. III. This is an exposition of “the message of Milton”, addressed to “an age increasingly skeptical”.

tending an already august tradition, and some of their views might conceivably help us to understand the response that Milton's reference might have elicited.

1.

That Jacob has been regarded as a type of *Christ* is a commonplace of theology⁴; nor is it surprising to claim the same for Jacob's Ladder in view of the express words of Jesus, "Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1:51). To such an authoritative statement the theologians of the English Renaissance could not, and did not, take exception; they accepted it to a man, from the popular expositors to the more widely respected scholars and preachers of the time—"silver-tongued" Henry Smith, Gervase Babington, Andrew Willet, Henry Ainsworth, Richard Sibbes, James Ussher, John Lightfoot⁵. To the consensus of opinion among native theologians might be added that of such Continental apologists as

⁴ For references, see the general index to the *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (1844 sqq.), CCXXI, 984. On Augustine, consult XLVI, 344; but for the *loci classici*, see *De Civitate Dei*, XVI, 37–38, and *In Joannis Evangelium Tractatus VII*, 23. Cf. *infra*, Note 12.

⁵ Smith, *Iacobs Ladder* (London, 1595), sigs. B2v–B3; Babington, *infra* (Note 9); Willet, *Thesaurus Ecclesiae* (Cambridge, 1604), p. 94, and *Hexapla in Genesis* (Cambridge, 1605), pp. 301, 304; Ainsworth, *infra* (Note 24); Sibbes, *infra* (Note 8); Ussher, *Immanuel* (London, 1638), p. 53; Lightfoot, *The Harmony, Chronicle and Order of the Old Testament* (London, 1647), p. 30. Thus also: William Hunnis, *A Hyve Full of Hunnye* (London, 1578), fol. 67v; Eusebius Pagit, *The Historie of the Bible* (London, 1613), p. 27; Sebastian Benefield, *Eight Sermons Publikely Preached in the Vniversity of Oxford* (Oxford, 1614), p. 50; Walter Sweeper, *Israels Redemption by Christ* (London, 1622), p. 11; Griffith Williams, *Seven Govlden Candlestickes* ([London], 1624), p. 258; Richard Senhouse, *Fovre Sermons* (London, 1627), p. 3; Alexander Ross, *Three Decads of Divine Meditations* (London, [1630]), p. 8; Alexander Grosse, *Svvet and Soule-Perswading Indvcements* (London, 1632), p. 14; Méric Casaubon et al., *Annotations upon... the Old and New Testament* (London, 1645), sig. g4; John Trapp, *A Clavis to the Bible* (London, 1650), p. 226; George Hughes, *An Analytical Exposition of... Genesis* (London, 1672), pp. 354–355; and the authorities quoted and cited by Whiting, *supra* (Note 3), pp. 71ff. Today the tradition is still alive, albeit no longer as widespread. For parallel modern views, see George A. Buttrick, *Jacob's Ladder—Christmas Ladder: Religion in Life* 12 (1943), pp. 3–8; D. T. Niles, *In the Beginning* (1958), p. 68.

Johann Michael Dilherr and Giovanni Diodati, alike available in English translations⁶—and, far more important than all, Luther and Calvin⁷.

Three statements might suffice to clarify the way that Jacob's Ladder was normally regarded as a "notable representation" of Christ. The first is one of the numerous, though equally fine, expositions by Richard Sibbes:

Iacobs Ladder, it reached from Earth to Heaven; and that pointed to Christ himselfe, who is *Emanuel*, God and man, who brought God and man together: He was a Mediator betweene both, and a friend to both: He was that *Ladder*, that touched Heaven and Earth, and joyned both together. Now it is said, the *Angels* ascended and descended upon that *Ladder*: so the *Angels* descending upon us, is, because they ascend and descend upon *Iacobs Ladder* first; that is, upon Christ⁸.

Earlier, Babington had attempted to explain the "mystery" even more precisely, with particular reference to the dual nature of Christ:

The ladder is Christ. The foot of it in earth noteth his humanitie, man of the substance of his mother borne in the world. The top reaching vp to heauen, noteth his diuinitie, *God of the substance of the Father begotten before all worlds, perfit God, and perfit man*, by which vnion of natures, he hath ioyned earth and heauen together, that is, God and man⁹.

Finally, we have the convenient tabular exposition by William Guild:

Iacobs Ladder, Gen. 28.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Iacobs Ladder</i> , which hee saw in a Vision, stood vpon the earth, but the top reached to Heauen: | <i>So Christ, albeit he was humbled in shape of sinfull flesh, touching the earth as it were, yet he was the most</i> |
|---|---|

⁶ Dilherr, *Contemplations*, trans. William Style (London, 1640), pp. 46–50; Diodati, *Pious and Learned Annotations upon the Bible*, trans. Anon., 3rd edn (London, 1651), sig. E4.

⁷ Luther, *Vber das Erst Buch Mose* (Wittenberg, 1527), fol. 249v; Calvin, *A Commentarie... vpon the first Booke of Moses called Genesis*, trans. Thomas Tymme (London, 1578), p. 596. The latter is quoted at length by Whiting, *supra* (Note 3), p. 72.

⁸ *Light from Heaven* (London, 1638), I, pp. 100–101. For parallel statements by Sibbes, see *The Christians Portion* (London, 1638), pp. 7, 116; *Yea and Amen* (London, 1638), p. 29; and particularly *The Fovntaine Opened* (London, 1638), I, 100.

⁹ *Certaine... Notes vpon... Genesis* (London, 1592), fol. 114.

- and so it ioyned as it were heauen and earth together, *Gen.* 28. 12. *High God, reaching so to heauen, and reconciling, as the two natures in himselve by personall Vnion: so God and vs together by his death and mediation, Ro.* 5. 10.
2. The Angels went vp and downe by it. *So by Christ Iesus they are become ministring spirits, comming and returning for the good and protection of the godly, Heb.* 1. *as also by him our prayers ascend, and Gods blessings descend.*
3. No ascending vp to heauen, but by the Ladder. *So no attaining to that inheritance, but by Iesus Christ alone, Ioh.* 10. 7.
4. *Iacob* in his Pilgrimage saw the Ladder onely in a Vision. *So wee see Christ heere in our pilgrimage but in a glasse, as it were, darkely and in part, 1. Cor.* 13.
5. The Lord stood about it, and made his promise of *Canaan* to *Iacob*, *verse* 13. *So in Christ, and through him, are the Lords promises of heauen, made and ratified to vs, Ioh.* 2. 1.
6. In the place which was the House of God, and gate of Heauen, was the Ladder scene, *verse* 19. *So in Christs Church (which is the foresaid truely) through Faith can wee onely get a spirituall sight of Christ.*
7. At the foote of this Ladder, *Iacob* did repose and sleepe. *Shadowing the rest and peace of conscience, which the godly haue vnder the shadow of Christs intercession.*

The Disparitie.

It was a Ladder wheron to climbe, but not giuing strength to that effect: but Christ Iesus, that blessed Ladder, is both. That Ladder at *Iacob*'s awaking vanished, and begate feare by the Vision thereof: but Christ Iesus, at our awaking in the Resurrection, shall more cleerely appeare, whose sight by faith heere expels feare, and begets confident joy, and whose clearer sight then shall beget farre greater¹⁰.

¹⁰ *Moses Vnuailed* (London, 1620), pp. 33–35. Guild's book contains the essence of Renaissance typology; the full title explains its all-inclusive nature: *Moses Vnuailed: or those Figvres which served vnto the patterne and shaddow of heavenly things, pointing out the Messiah CHRIST IESVS, briefly explained*. An earlier companion volume: *The Harmony of all the Prophets: Breathing with one mouth the mysterie of Christs comming* (London, 1619). Among other similar works: Charles Herle, *Contemplations and Devotions* (London, 1631); Thomas Taylor, *Christ Revealed* (London, 1635); Richard Montagu, *The Acts and Monuments of the Church* (London, 1642), Ch. III.

2.

But the view of Jacob's Ladder as a type of Christ, though by far the most widespread Renaissance interpretation, was not the only one. In proposing *alternative theories*, the writers of the period had numerous precedents. According to St. Gregory the Great, for example, the Ladder is a symbol both of man's contemplation of God and of man's compassion toward man¹¹; while St. Augustine, as we are reminded by a Renaissance commentator, "by God standing vpon the ladder vnderstādeth Christ hanging vpon the crosse: by the angels ascending, the preachers handling mysticall doctrines, by the angels descending preachers applying themselues to morall doctrine"¹². In addition, Jacob's vision had become an *exemplum* freely used, the "lesson" being, at least as far as St. Jerome was concerned, that "the sinner must not despair of salvation nor the righteous man rest secure in his virtue"¹³. Drawing freely upon such varied interpretations in patristic and medieval literature, and quite frequently adding to them generously, Renaissance expositors never fail to impress us with their imaginative commentaries on Jacob's Ladder. Thus we find the Ladder interpreted both as a representation of the way prayers "maintaine our traffique with Heauen"¹⁴, and as a symbolic affirmation of the love of God that extends—"like to Iacobs ladder"—from heaven to earth¹⁵. Concurrently, it was viewed as a figurative declaration of the "course and order of mans Saluation"¹⁶. In the words of Sir John Hayward, who might have recollected a similar passage in St. John Chrysostom¹⁷,

¹¹ *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, II, 5; in *Patr. Lat.*, LXXVII, 33. For a variation of this idea, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, II (II), 181, 4.

¹² Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesin* (Cambridge, 1605), p. 300. The original statement will be found in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, CXIX, 2; in *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1836), IV, 1948.

¹³ *Epistola CXXIII*, 15; trans. W. H. Fremantle, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series (New York, 1893), VI, 236.

¹⁴ Henry King, *Two Sermons Preached at White-Hall* (London, 1627), II, 31. Thus also Paul Wentworth, *The Miscellanie... of Orizons* (London, 1615), pp. 62–63, and Henry Valentine, *Noahs Doue* (London, 1627), p. 35.

¹⁵ Lewis Thomas, *Demegoriai* (London, 1600), sig. K 2 v.

¹⁶ Anthony Maxey, *The Sermon preached... at VWhite-Hall* (London, 1605), sig. E 2.

¹⁷ *In Joannem Homilia LXXXIII*, 5: "the ladder seems to me to signify... the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend

the ordinary way which God hath appointed to attaine felicitie, is a long and laboursome walke, a great iourney, from vertue to vertue, *from strength to strength, vntill wee appeare before GOD in Sion*. This was figured by the ladder which Iacob saw in a vision; extending from earth to heauen, and consisting (doubtlesse) of many steppes. Signifying, that no man can attaine that happy height, no man can approach him who standeth at the toppe, but by many degrees of vertues, whereof euery one also hath many steppes¹⁸.

Still others, it is reported, “by this ladder insinuate a Christian profession, in which are diuers degrees and vertues to rise vp by: angels ascending, such are vnderstood, as are giuen to contemplation: by the angels descending, such as follow an actiue and practicall life”¹⁹. Of the even less probable interpretations, one was the identification of the Ladder with “the genealogie of Christ”²⁰; another, its use as a warning lest we incline to rest in “the naturall cause” to the detriment of “the supreme and supernaturall”—for Jacob, we are assured, “when he saw the Angels ascending and descending, enquired who stood at the top of the ladder and sent them”²¹.

Since the Ladder was thus widely used, at least one other interpretation does not come as a surprise. This was its ready association with the elaborate “world picture” of the Renaissance, according to which the universe is a majestic system of interdependent levels of existence arranged hierarchically from inanimate nature all the way up to the angels gathered about the throne of God²². The most eloquent exposition of this *scala mundi* in terms of Jacob's Ladder was penned by Peter Sterry, the Cambridge Platonist (*d.* 1672):

Being it self, in its universal Nature, from its purest heighth, by beautiful, harmonious, just degrees and steps, *descendeth* into every Being, even to the from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners” (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st Series, XIV, 1890, p. 312). The phrase quoted under my title is part of Chrysostom's original statement.

¹⁸ *Dauids Teares* (London, 1623), p. 297.

¹⁹ *Apud* Andrew Willet, *supra* (Note 12).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ John Trapp, *Gods Love-Tokens* (London, 1637), p. 10.

²² For a number of relevant primary and secondary sources, see my three contributions: *The Numerological Approach to Cosmic Order: Isis* 49 (1958), pp. 391–397; *Renaissance Thought on the Celestial Hierarchy: Journ. of the Hist. of Ideas* 20 (1959), pp. 155–166; and *The Microcosm of Man: Notes and Queries* 7 (1960), pp. 54–56.

lowest shades. All ranks and degrees of Being, so become like the mystical steps in that scale of Divine Harmony and Proportions, *Jacobs Ladder*. Every form of Being to the lowest step, seen and understood according to its order and proportions in its descent upon this *Ladder*, seemeth as an *Angel*, or as a Troop of Angels in one, full of all Angelick Musick and Beauty²³.

Renaissance England did not, however, accept all theories proposed. The line was drawn, firmly, so as to exclude the more extreme views of the Hebrew "doctors" and Roman Catholics. Maimonides was quoted as a case in point:

The things made known to a prophet by prophetic vision, were made known unto him by way of parable; and immediately, the interpretation of the parable, was written in his hart, and he knew what it was. As the Ladder which Jakob our father saw, and the Angels ascending and descending on it. And that was a parable of the (fowr) monarchies²⁴.

"All this", Bishop Simon Patrick noted dryly, "is the pure invention of idle Men, who dream upon the Holy Scriptures"²⁵. More "idle" than most, however, were the Roman Catholics, inevitably the subject of unrestrained Protestant abuse. Thus John Stoughton, enumerating their numerous "strange devices", was particularly abusive concerning their claim that "there are two Ladders up to Heaven; a red Ladder by *Christs blood*, and a white Ladder by *Maries beautie*, which is farre the easier: me thinks these men mistake *Jacobs Ladder*, but yet something like it was, for they are in a dreame, as *Iacob* was"²⁶. The rest of the passage is unprintable.

²³ *A Discourse of the Freedom of the Will* (London, 1675), p. 30; the passage is more readily available in Vivian de Sola Pinto, ed., *Peter Sterry* (1934), p. 152. The same principle of universal gradation was stated by Donne thus: "We represent the Angels to our selves, and to the world with wings, they are able to flie; and yet when *Iacob* saw them ascending and descending, even those winged Angels had a Ladder, they went by degrees" (*LXXX Sermons* [London, 1640], pp. 376–377). A lengthy passage from John Weemes (1636), similar in tenor, is quoted by Sister Mary Irma Corcoran, *Milton's Paradise with Reference to the Hexameral Background* (1945), p. 42. See also F. M. van Helmont, *Paradoxal Discourses* (London, 1685), p. 17.

²⁴ *Apud* Henry Ainsworth, *Annotations upon... Genesis* ([Amsterdam], 1616), sig. Xlv. The source is *Mishne Torah*, I, vii, 3; ed. Elias Soloweyczik (London, 1863), p. 47. I am grateful to my colleague Dorothee Finkelstein for assistance in locating this reference.

²⁵ *A Commentary upon... Genesis* (London, 1695), p. 411.

²⁶ *XI. Choice Sermons* (London, 1640), II, 105. For a parallel statement, see Theophilus Wodenote, *Eremicus Theologus* (London, 1654), p. 7.

3.

But surely, it will be demanded, I am not asserting that *Milton* had read such contemporary expositions of Jacob's Ladder? The answer, of course, is that I have made no such claim. That, indeed, would not only be foolish but unnecessary. After all, had Milton actually consulted these Renaissance commentators, he would have had to practice the advice of the Nun's Priest in Chaucer ("taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille")—when all along the fruit could be gathered merely by consulting the works of St. Augustine. We, however, cannot afford to bypass the commentators. The fruit is surely needed. So is the chaff, which is also part of "the power of the moment", the general order of ideas characteristic of the intellectual and spiritual temper of the Renaissance. To understand these ideas is to progress a long way toward understanding Milton and other thinkers of his age, alike indebted to a tradition that, even though variously understood and variously presented, ultimately comprises a unity. Thus Milton may not have been aware of all the varied theories pertaining to Jacob's Ladder. But the precise extent of his knowledge is not the issue. What matters is his use of a concept hallowed by time, and his consequent expectation that at least some of the traditional interpretations—the *scala Christi*, the *scala mundi*—would be recalled by his "fit audience though few". And might it not be that the more extensive the recollection, the greater the pleasure—in itself reward enough for any scholar?

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