

*70 Faces (Jacob's Ladder)*

There's a wonderful image that the ancient Jewish Rabbis would use when they would try to interpret the stories and teachings of the what we call today the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, and what they would have referred to simply as the Torah or the Teaching, which is that they would use this Hebrew phrase *Shiv'im panim la-Torah*—roughly translated as “each verse of the Torah (or each verse of scripture) has 70 different faces.” Each verse has 70 faces, 70 different looks, 70 different interpretations, 70 different meanings.

That number 70 in Hebrew we can remember often symbolizes the idea of numerous or many, as in too many to count—for example, like how Jesus teaches about how we should forgive one another 70 times over, basically that we should forgive more times than we can even count...

I think this image of scripture having 70 different faces rings especially true when we try to understand a truly great and timeless story like the one we heard today, the story of Jacob and his dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, a great vision that leads Jacob to wake up, and to utter his cry of enlightenment, a cry that sounds at least to me much like a Zen-Buddhist flash of sudden insight—a Japanese term for it being *satori*, sudden comprehension, sudden understanding of the true nature of things—as Jacob wakes up from his sleep and says: “*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I didn't know it.*” “*How awesome is this place!*” Right here and right now, this very place, this very moment... This... “*This,*” Jacob concludes, this unexpected place, “*This is none other than the house of God... this is the gate of heaven.*”

So maybe for one face of it today we can picture Jacob's ladder as a story of sudden enlightenment, a story of suddenly awakening to the presence of God (“*around, within, above*” as we sang and prayed earlier). Maybe this is a face of the story that speaks to you today, a reminder about how every ordinary moment in life is in fact extraordinary and its own type of miracle. A contemporary Buddhist writer has put it this way, “*The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth, dwelling deeply in the present moment and feeling truly alive.*” How awesome is this place, Jacob says, how amazing is this moment, and to think that before this I hardly even noticed it...

For another face of this scripture though we can consider some of the backstory here and we can think about how Jacob might have been the least likely out of all the people mentioned thus far in the Bible to have had such a compelling and enlightening encounter with God.

Just to recall a bit with you today, the basics of what we read in his story are that Jacob was born just after his older brother Esau, and that he emerged into this world clutching after Esau's heel, which is even where the name Jacob comes from, meaning “heel-grabber” or “heel-puller.” This dynamic of being the younger brother always in competition with and always grasping after the older brother would play itself out throughout Jacob's life, right up to the point when Jacob tricked his older brother out of his birthright by bribing the starving Esau with a bowl of hot soup after a long hunt. Jacob then continues his trickster ways by posing as his older brother while tricking his then-blind father Isaac into conferring the all-important family blessing upon him

rather than upon Esau. By the time we catch up with Jacob in our story today, he's sort of burned all of his bridges and is on the run, a refugee in his own land—hence stopping at a random place, and sleeping with only a stone for a pillow...

Commenting on the questionable nature of his character, the Biblical scholar Renita Weems captures Jacob's story well when she claims him to be “the first real human being” in the Bible. She says that with Jacob, “we finally have someone with adjectives we can use—deceptive, clever, shrewd.” Whereas before Jacob, she notes, all the characters in the Bible seem to have been more one-dimensional and less relatable. Jacob though, he is deeply flawed in some ways and yet, although we might not want to admit it, he's the type of underdog that we can find ourselves rooting for. So for another face of this story we can picture and we can relate to the very human face of Jacob—deceptive, clever, shrewd, “the first real human being” in the Bible.

For another one of the seventy faces—and I don't think we'll bet getting to all seventy today, but we can try for a few more—for another interpretation, we can focus less on Jacob as a person and more on the dream that he has, particularly his beautiful vision of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending the ladder.

Jacob's ladder—70 faces might not even be enough to make sense of this highly charged symbolic image.

One ancient interpretation of the ladder claims that the ladder symbolizes what it's like to be a human being. That like a ladder we have our feet firmly planted on this earth, but that also like a ladder we can reach for the sky. That in some sense we're grounded here, but that in another we're free to let our minds wander and to dream about what's beyond. One face then is the face of the ladder as a mirror for what it's like to be human.

Another interpretation tells the story of an ancient Roman citizen questioning the Jewish faith, and asking a Rabbi what happened after the first six days of creation, what did God do after those first six days? What has God been up to? The Rabbi responds to her saying that what God's been up to since those first six days is building ladders, and placing them everywhere as a sign that the creation of the world is an ongoing project. Like a ladder at a construction site, then, Jacob's ladder could be like an “under construction” sign, a sign that the work of creating and building up the world continues.

Yet another interpretation of the ladder likens the ladder to liturgy and to community worship, and suggests that the ladder is a good metaphor to what it is that we're doing when we gather here for worship on Sunday mornings. The idea here is that worship is like a going up and going down ladder—that we send up to God our best thoughts and prayers and music and other offerings, and we await, and we hope, and we expect that God will send something like wisdom or insight or a message down to us as well. Worship is like a ladder because we send things up the ladder to God, and we expect to receive something back down the ladder in return.

Another, similar interpretation of the ladder might say that the ladder is a good image for the life of prayer. There's that nice little detail in Jacob's dream about how on the ladder there is traffic moving in both directions...Jacob sees angels, or messengers from God, both ascending and descending the ladder. This ladder, then, is like a two-way street, with traffic in both ways, which

also is what prayer is like at its best as well, a type of two-way conversation or dialogue with God...

For another face of the ladder, we could think about all the different rungs, and we could think about the ladder as an image for the path for the spiritual life—about how all of life we're trying to make our own sort of progress in terms of our understanding and awareness of things, trying to climb different rungs, trying to learn and cultivate different virtues...hospitality as a rung on the ladder; kindness as a rung; simplicity as a rung; compassion; wisdom; prudence; gratitude; forgiveness; freedom; joy, all rungs on the great ladder of life.

Another face that's been proposed is that the ladder here represents scripture and the Bible itself. Some have pointed out that among the many accounts of dreams that are in the Bible, this is the only dream for which an interpretation isn't given. Reading closely and studying the scripture itself, then, is meant to fulfill the role of interpreting the dream, scripture is like a ladder we read and interpret in order to ascend to God.

Another, and maybe similar face here, is to take it all at face value and to say that the ladder is just a ladder. Sometimes a ladder is just a ladder, as Freud might say. One thought here is that it's significant that the image here is of a ladder, because a ladder takes effort and care to climb. A ladder isn't an escalator, as one interpreter has pointed out. A ladder takes a certain care and effort to climb.

Finally, a last face for today might show us about how this scripture is really all about the idea of how God visits us whoever we are, and wherever we are along life's journey. We can remember again that Jacob was sort of on the run, in between one place and another. He came to the end of his journey that day, and he stopped at a random place. It was there, en route, stopping for a rest at a random place, that God visited him. God comes looking for us, in other words, wherever we are. God comes looking for us...

And so in the end Jacob wakes up and says: *"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I didn't know it."* *"How awesome is this place!"* Right here and right now, this very place, this very moment...This... *"This,"* Jacob concludes, this unexpected place, *"This is none other than the house of God...this is the gate of heaven."* Amen.