

The Revelation of the Divine Presence

Distilled from Chapter 1 of 'Who Is God?' by Richard Bauckham by Brett Jordan

Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the LORD, and he said: "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz.

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's household, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth."

Genesis 28:10-22 (NIV)

Genesis is a book about how God created the universe from nothing. It then focusses on one tiny planet among the billions he has made, and how he fills it with living things. And of these living things, humans are created 'in his image' – to live in relationship with their creator, and to be God's representatives on the planet he has made for them.

Sadly, humans decided not to follow their maker's instructions and both they and the world they lived in were massively damaged as a result.

But God did not give up on his creation. Genesis provides us with a record of how God starts a grand plan that will bring humans back into a right relationship with him.

In the chapters before the one Paul has just read to us, God has appeared to Abraham (Jacob's grandfather) and Isaac (Jacob's father) and made significant promises to both of them.

God repeats these promises to Jacob, as well as personalising them to both him and his descendants.

The focus however is the revelation from God that his presence will be with him from this point on.

God's revelation to Jacob comes at a very difficult time in his life. He is on the run from Esau, after tricking him out of his father's blessing. He is on a 500 mile journey (at least a month of walking daily from dawn to dusk) to the home of his mum's relatives.

Away from his family, he is forced to decide whether the God of his father and grandfather will be his God... and, take note, it is not Jacob who seeks God, but God who seeks Jacob.

The image Jacob sees is similar to an Egyptian pyramid, with a stone staircase on one of its sides. They were built by the ancient Mesopotamians (from which Jacob's ancestors came) as representations of the cosmic mountains that they believed touched the heavens, where their gods lived. The stairs allowed worshippers to ascend to where the gods lived. But the God of the Bible is different from these gods.

Jacob is not required to ascend the staircase to meet God. Even more surprisingly the message is not brought to Jacob by the angels that are moving up and down the staircase ('angel' means 'messenger'). God talks *directly* to Jacob, saying, "I am with you, and will watch over you wherever you go..."

Don't let anyone tell you the Old Testament God is different from the New Testament God. From the very beginning God has taken the initiative in communicating with the people he created.

Jacob awakes with a profound realisation.

"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."

Gen 28:16 (NIV)

Jacob's God has visited the place where Jacob was sleeping. Jacob's God has taken the initiative to make himself known to a human being.

Jacob takes the rock he was using as a pillow and turns it into a memorial of this awe-inspiring encounter with God. But the most important revelation is not that God appeared at Bethel ('the house of God') but as God declared at the end of the dream...

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

Gen 28:15 (NIV)

And this is Jacob's experience. From Bethel to Haran, from Haran to Canaan, then back to Bethel, in Hebron and even Egypt, God remained beside this sneaky, scheming, imperfect man. At the end of his life as Jacob blessed his children, he was able to talk about the God...

'who has been my shepherd all my life to this day.'

Gen 48:15 (NIV)

The New Testament references Jacob's experience a number of times, most explicitly at the beginning of John's Gospel.

He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man".

John 1:51 (NIV)

This is the first of 25 key sayings that Jesus makes in John's Gospel, most of which are 'riddles', intended to challenge the hearer to think more deeply about their meaning.

We are not told whether Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael (the 'you' in 'I tell you' is plural) immediately understood the meaning of the riddle. But they would have understood that this was 'visionary' language, and probably that it was talking about Jacob's dream.

This might also explain why Jesus has just said that Nathanael is '*an Israelite in who there is no deceit*' (v.47), contrasting him with Jacob, who was quite the opposite!

And, more importantly, it is saying that Jesus, the Son of Man, is the staircase that the angels are ascending and descending on... Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, Jesus, like the LORD in the Jacob story, descended from heaven in order to be with us on earth.

He is with the disciples on earth so that they might be with him in heavenly glory, a theme that John emphasises many times in his Gospel.

And, in the last book of the Bible, the theme surfaces again.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

Revelation 21:3

As the new creation is being put into place, God once again moves towards us, this is not primarily a destruction of earth, but a re-

creation... restoring the Eden that God had originally intended, where humans live in perfect relationship with their creator.

As it says in the next verse, quoting from Isaiah 25:8...

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Revelation 21:4

Now that's a God I'm happy to trust and worship. Hallelujah, and amen.