

# Eschatological interpretation of John 1:51 and the *Ladder of Jacob*

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## Abstract

The quotation from Gn 28:12 in Jacob's dream as quoted in John's gospel, and the Ladder of Jacob have differences in their texts. While John used the concept of the angels of God ascending and descending from Jacob's dream, the Ladder of Jacob employs the whole story and presented the eschatological interpretation of the dream through the mouth of the archangel, Sariel. Following its eschatological interpretation, it seems possible to find an earlier eschatological interpretation of Jacob's dream in Jn 1:51. This is furthermore supported by another element from the motif that was used in Jn 1:51, namely that of the open heaven. The "Son of Man" who substituted the ladder is an important adaptation in the reception of the motif in Jn 1:51, because it is a symbol of connection between the open heaven and the earth. In addition, Revelation too also displays similarities with the Ladder of Jacob in its description of the heavenly realm that was seen by Jacob and John. From this similarity between the Ladder of Jacob and Revelation, it is evident that an eschatological interpretation of Jacob's dream is already present in Jn 1:51.

**Keywords:** Eschatology, the Ladder of Jacob, Revelation, Pseudepigraphon, Angel, open heaven

## Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to compare the reception of Gn 28:12 in the Old Testament pseudepigraphon, the *Ladder of Jacob*, with that of Jn 1:51. John used the motif from Jacob's dream in Gn 28:12. Even though most scholars agree that Jn 1:51 is an allusion to Jacob's dream in Gn 28:12, it is technically not a direct quotation from the LXX because the order of the ascending and descending angels is a unique expression. Usually, the order of the angels is descending first and then ascending because angels dwell in the heavens with God. The expression regarding the order in which the angels move is only found in the New Testament in Jn 1:51.

Recently, Old Testament scholars (Wenham, 2002: 222) placed the focus of the study of Jacob's dream in Gn 28:12 as the covenant concerning the earthly land to Jacob and the protection during his refuge. This is due to God's promise to give land to Jacob (Gn 28:13-14) and his promise to protect him (Gn 28:15). From this view, the vision that Jacob saw in the dream is interpreted as the symbol of God's protection through the angels who are ascending and descending between earth and heaven. However, with the concept of the covenant for the earthly land as the perspective of Old Testament scholars, it is confusing that Jesus refers to himself as the ladder from Gn 28:13 in Jn 1:51. This is because John used this motif from Gn 28:12 as well as two other motifs: the concept of the open heaven from Ezk 1:1 (Manning Jr, 2004: 201) and the Son of Man from Dn 7:13 (Carson, 1991: 164). The method of allusion to the Old Testament in Jn 1:51 is inter-textual in nature. Different elements were incorporated from various sources and combined. This is the same as in other Jewish apocalyptic literature, such as the Old Testament Peudepigraphon *Jacob's Ladder*, which is directly related to Jacob's vision in Gn 28:12 because it was based on the Genesis narrative and reconstructed with the author's own interpretation. In the *Ladder of Jacob* (Kugel, 1995: 210), the various rabbinic texts and basic understandings of Jacob's

dream were mixed. Hence, it is the intention of this study to compare the Judaic eschatological background of the *Ladder of Jacob* with Jn 1:51 in order to study the John's intention with the quotation from Gn 28:12 in Jn 1:51.

### **The Ladder of Jacob**

Even though there is no original text, the *Ladder of Jacob* is important because it directly uses Jacob's dream in Gn 28:12 and interprets it by using the words of the angel, Sariel. According to Charlesworth (1985: 401), it was edited by Slavic editors who made many changes in the Old Testament texts that were used. There are two versions of the "Ladder" in the Palaea text. It is significant that both versions used the Septuagint version of Gn 28:13. Greek was regarded to be the original language of the *Ladder of Jacob* (Charlesworth, 1985: 403; Kugel, 1995: 209). The *Ladder of Jacob* is composed of seven chapters:

- Chapter 1 – Jacob's dream and conversation with God about the blessing
- Chapter 2 – Jacob's prayer to God, asking for understanding of the dream
- Chapter 3 – God sends the archangel Sariel to explain the vision
- Chapter 4 – Sariel changes Jacob's name to Israel
- Chapters 5–7 – Sariel's eschatological interpretations

The vision of Jacob was retold in Chapter 1, and it was interpreted by the archangel, Sariel, according to God's order in chapters 5–7.

In LadJac 1:1, the Jacob story about the vision in Bethel started with "then":

Jacob then went to Laban his uncle. He found a place and, laying his head on a stone, he slept there, for the sun had gone down. He has a dream (Charlesworth, 1985: 407).

There are two possibilities regarding this text. The first is that it is part of another text. The previous text would be Jacob's cheating of Esau. Another possibility is that the author intended this text to be considered a continuation of Jacob's story. "Then" (LadJac 1:10) connects it to the *Genesis* story (Gn 28:10). Details regarding names such as Beersheba and Haran were omitted. The vision that Jacob saw in the dream is almost the same as that of Genesis 28. However, the details explaining the ladder are found between the placing of the ladder from earth to heaven in LadJac 1:3 and the fact that the angel is ascending and descending in v. 7:

And the top of the ladder was the face as of a man, carved out of fire. There were twelve steps leading to the top of the ladder, and on each step to the top there were two human faces, on the right and on the left, twenty-four faces including their chest. And the face in the middle was higher than all that I saw, the one of fire, including the shoulders and arms, exceedingly terrifying, more than those twenty-four faces (Charlesworth, 1985: 407).

There is also the interpretation by the author of the place where God stands. While the place of God is ambiguous in Gn 28:13, it is above the highest face in LadJac 1:8. In the case of Gn 28:13, the word **יָיָ** can be translated to "above it" and "besides him". It is possible that God stands with Jacob, and the angels of God are ascending and descending on the ladder. In the *Ladder of Jacob*, it is clear where God stands. Another difference is the introduction of God himself. In Genesis 28, God said, "I am the Lord" and placed a blessing upon Jacob. However, the statement, "I am the Lord" comes after God has called Jacob's name twice. While God blesses Jacob with land and descendants in Gn 28:14, the phrase, "[I]n the last

times the years of completion shall be blessed” was added in LadJac 1:11. In addition, the phrase, “My blessing with which I have blessed you shall flow from you unto the last generation” is also added. The emphasis of these two phrases can be interpreted as the perseverance of God’s blessing until the end. However, it can also be seen as an eschatological expression because the interpretation of the dream by the archangel, Sariel, is also eschatological. Johnson (1992:134) pointed out that these verses have an eschatological focus, demonstrating that the author also interpreted *Genesis 28* with an eschatological focus.

There is a short record of the response of Jacob in *Genesis 28*. However, after the confession about the house of God and the gate of heaven, the song of Jacob appeared in the *Ladder of Jacob 2* with a detailed description of heaven above the ladder. LadJac 2:15 used Isa 6:2 to explain the seraphim:

Before the face of your glory the six-winged seraphim are afraid, and they cover their feet and faces with their wings while flying with their other (wings), and they sing unceasingly a hymn (Charlesworth, 1985: 408).

From the song in LadJac 2:7, the scene of heaven above the ladder consists of many angels who sit on fiery thrones of glory surrounding God. This is similar to the opinions of Rabbi Hiyya the Elder and Rabbi Jannai in *Genesis Rabba* (Freedman & Simon, 1939: 627). The concept of a throne of glory is regarded to be the basic celestial concept in the intertestamental period. It appears in Merkaba mysticism and is based on Ezk 1:26, demonstrating the likeness to a man on a throne.

The interpretation of Jacob’s dream was presented by the archangel. It uses the order of God in Chapter 3, giving confidence to the reader about the author’s interpretation. The author tried to follow the order of *Genesis* by writing about the name change of Jacob. This matches *Genesis* since Jacob received the interpretation by the angel who he met at the Jabbok (cf. Gn 32:22). The interpretation of the dream involves the numbers connected to the ladder. According to the *Ladder of Jacob*, the ladder has 12 steps. There are two human faces on each step. The interpretation of the angel imposes meaning to each step and face. The 12 steps mean 12 age periods, and the 24 faces are the kings of the nations. Endo (2002: 143) regarded the ladder as the present age, the twelve steps as the age periods and the 24 faces as the kings of the godless nations. There are four ascents of this age that will destroy the descendants of Jacob, which is similar to the four kings in Daniel 7. According to Kugel (1995: 215), the theme is similar to the four empires that were widespread in the late Second Temple period. Kugel (1995: 215) interprets the four ascents as the four angels ascending and descending. He considers it to be a symbol in which the ascent is positive and the descent negative. However, it is difficult to see the four ascents as the four angels because there is no mention of the four angels in the *Ladder of Jacob*. It is better to interpret this as the number of times of moving up.

The order of the angels’ motion is changed to “descending and ascending” in LadJac 7:1-2, meaning that the author purposively changed the order. Charlesworth (1985: 404) regarded the *Ladder of Jacob 7* as a later addition by a Christian author. Its record is regarded to be more eschatological:

And as for the angels you saw descending and ascending the ladder, in the last years there will be a man from the Most High, and he will desire to join the upper (things) with the lower. (LadJac 7:1-2)

“A man from the Most High” (LadJac 7:1-2) indicates the Christ here. From the phrase, “in the last years” (LadJac 7:1-2), the eschatological interpretation of Jacob’s ladder is expressed as the union of heaven and earth. The earth is glorified by receiving heavenly glory (LadJac 7:10).

### **Jacob’s Ladder in *John’s gospel***

The quotation from Gn 28:12 in Jn 1:51 is not as detailed as in the *Ladder of Jacob*. While all the content of Jacob’s fugitive story was used in the *Ladder of Jacob*, Jesus used the motif of the angels ascending and descending from Gn 28:12 in addition to other motifs such as the open heaven and the Son of Man. It is difficult to address the motif, the Son of Man, because it has been studied broadly by many scholars. Therefore, the open heaven and the angels ascending and descending will be discussed.

### **The open heaven**

The open heaven alludes to Ezk 1:1. The vision that Ezekiel saw from the open heaven is the vision of the chariot. In Gn 28:12, the concept of the open heaven can be inferred from Jacob’s proclamation that the place is the gate of heaven. The concept of an open gate depicts the scene of an open heaven to the imagination of the reader, even though it is not referred to directly in Gn 28:12. The concept of the open heaven was used in apocalyptic texts:

The opening of the heavens is an expression that occurs here first and has influenced a number of later visionary and apocalyptic texts, in the sense of glimpsing of a heavenly scene or witnessing the descent of a heavenly being (e.g., 3 Macc 6:18; 2 Bar 22:1; T. Lev. 5:1; Matt 3:16; Acts 7:56; Rev 19:11). It here refers to the preliminaries of a theophany (Allen, 1990: 22).

The problem is whether it can be applied to Jn 1:51 or not. There is another opinion regarding the allusion to Ezk 1:1:

The opening of the heavens is an eschatological motif in Is 63:19 (LXX), and the baptism of Jesus. It is seen by early Christian thought as a sign of the Messiah (Mk 1:10). (Schnackenburg, 1980:321)

Westcott (1908: 28) also regarded it as a symbol of free intercourse between God and man by comparing it with Is 64:1 (KJV). However, Ezk 1:1 is more convincing than Is 63:19 (LXX) because the expression is in more detail. Nevertheless, it is clear that these two verses (Ezk 1:1 and Is 63:19) are regarded as eschatological revelations.

There are various possible meanings of this promise in Jn 1:51. The one is regarding the baptism of Jesus. When Jesus received baptism by John the Baptist, the heaven opened (Mt 3:16; Lk 3:21). However, it is difficult to match this event with the promise in Jn 1:51 because it is antecedent to the promise. John the Baptist reminisced about this event in Jn 1:32, and then he and two of his disciples followed Jesus. The order of calling is Andrew, one of the two disciples of John the Baptist, followed by Peter, Phillip and Nathanael. Therefore, it is impossible that the promise in Jn 1:51 refers to the baptism of Jesus. According to Beasley-Murray (1999: 28), the reminiscences of the baptism of Jesus and the imagery of Jacob’s dream are complex and consist of the promise in v. 51. The opinion of Beasley-Murray (1999: 28) states that the opening of the heaven is the antecedent to the promise in v. 51, with the

same phrases being used and, therefore, the later promise in v. 51 is a reminder of the event at Jesus' baptism. However, Beasley-Murray (1999: 28), missed the possibility that both the opening of heaven and the promise are based on Jacob's or Ezekiel's vision. In addition, Jesus mentioned the future to the people, including Nathanael, and the event of the heaven opening happened after Jesus' promise in v. 51.

The *crucifixion* of Jesus can be understood as the realisation of this promise because the cross can be seen as the ladder in Jacob's vision. The ladder was understood to be the symbol of mediation between God and humanity. As written in the Synoptics, signs such as the opened tombs (Mt 27:52), the torn veil in the temple (Mk 15:38; Lk 23:45) and the gathering of the crowds (Lk 23:48) can be seen to be the realisation of the promise in Jn 1:51, that is, the future event of the promise with the cross-effecting redemption. It can be matched to the Lamb of God that was proclaimed by John the Baptist. However, this is not stated in *John's gospel*. If it is the realisation of the promise in Jn 1:51, it would have to be written in *John's gospel*. Contrary to the other gospels, *John's gospel* remains silent on the signs mentioned in the story of the death of Jesus.

Another interpretation is that the *resurrection* of Jesus – as portrayed in Matthew's gospel – is the accomplishment of the promise in Jn 1:51. When Jesus was resurrected from the dead, there was a great earthquake, and the angel of God appeared and descended from heaven (Mt 28:2). This is near to the realisation of the promise in v. 51. However, it does not match Jacob's vision in Gn 28:12. The first reason is the order of the angel's movement, which was to ascend first. The other possibility is the *ascension* of Jesus. Ascension into heaven and to sit on the right hand of God is recorded in Mk 16:19, with the more detailed record in Ac 1:9-11. Jesus ascended into heaven, and the clouds enveloped him. While the disciples looked up at the sky, the angels of God appeared and gave them advance notice about his eventual descension. This is the nearest mention of the promise in v. 51, involving both the ascending into heaven and the descending down to earth again in the future. Even though there is no expression about the open heaven, it is the same as in Jacob's vision. The problem is that in Jn 1:51, the one who ascends and descends is not Jesus but the angels of God. The verse refers to the angels of God who are ascending and descending upon the Son of Man on earth.

The best possible match with Jn 1:51 is the *parousia* in Revelation. There are expressions that the heaven opened (Rev 4:1; 19:11), and the angels descended (Rev 10:1; 11:12; 14:17; 18:1; 20:1). This situation is consistent with the ascension of Jesus, as mentioned by the angels in Ac 1:11. Regarding Ezk 1:1, the realisation must be matched with the *parousia* because the vision of Ezekiel was also understood eschatologically. Even though it can be understood as a symbol for the connection between God and humans, it has an eschatological meaning in connection with the open heaven. Therefore, it is possible that the open heaven does not only refer to the connection of the cross between God and the people but also the hope for the kingdom of God from the eschatological unity of heaven and earth.

### **The angels ascending and descending**

There are two problems with the angels of God that are ascending and descending. The first is the unique expression regarding the order of ascending first and then descending. The angels are celestial beings that are expected initially to descend. However, John's gospel followed the order of Gn 28:12. This poses the question of whether John's gospel merely followed the order of Gn 28:12 or whether there was another intention. The second problem is the understanding of the angels that are usually celestial messengers of God or guardian angels, as in Ac 12:15. The people who prayed for Peter in prison heard the girl's report

about Peter being released when he knocked at the door, and they thought it was Peter's angel. This means that a belief in guardian angels existed among them. In addition, Jesus mentioned guardian angels indirectly in Mt 18:10; there are the angels who are possessed by the little ones in heaven. From these two examples of guardian angels, it is certain that faith existed regarding angels in heaven who descend to assist people facing suffering such as Peter.

The word, "angel[s]" was used four times in John's gospel (Jn 1:51; 5:4; 12:29; 20:12), 20 times in *Matthew's gospel*, six times in *Mark's gospel* and 26 times in *Luke's gospel*. In the case of *John's gospel*, the term, "angel[s] of God", only appeared in 1:51 and in the other texts, the word "angel[s]" appeared without the term "of God". The "angel[s] of God" are used three times in *Luke's gospel* (Lk 12:8, 12:9; 15:10). In Mt 22:30, the "angel of God" occurs only in the Byzantine texts. According to Stewart ([1962] 1996: 36), there are distinctions in the use of the word "angel(s)" and the term "angel(s) of God (the Lord)". Angels are spiritual and celestial beings and obey the orders of God. The angel(s) of God or the angel(s) of the Lord are the heavenly existences sent by God as His agents or messengers to deal with men (Taylor, [1962] 1996: 38). In *Matthew's gospel*, the term, "the angel[s] of the Lord", is used many times.

This study aims to determine the intention of the use of the term, "angels of God", in Jn 1:51, which is partially due to the direct quotation from Gn 28:12. The phrase, "the angels of God ascending and descending" is unique, as mentioned above. From this uniqueness, it is certain that Jn1:51 is an allusion to Gn 28:12. However, the question concerning the intention of the allusion remains. John 1:51 is a complex quotation joining the concept of an open heaven and the Son of Man with other sources. The allusion from this text shows that there is a clear intention by the author. John's Jesus purposely transformed the text found in v. 51. Even though the phrase, "angels of God", has the possibility of transformation, Jesus used it directly in v. 51. The concept of the "angels of God" matched the usage of the phrase in Gn 28:12. Therefore, it is certain that the angels mentioned in *Genesis* and *John's gospel* had received a special order from God. The order from God could be protection in the *Genesis* text, and a possible match in *John's gospel* is to deliver the will of God. However, the revelation that the angels received from God is not clear because there is no mention of it. There is another possibility about the mission from God. If the promise of v. 51 is connected to the parousia, it could be applied to the angels in *Revelation* that received the mission from God to bring disasters to earth.

The order of ascending and descending proves that Jn 1:51 is based on Gn 28:12. Schnackenburg (1980: 321) interprets the order as the angels of God ascending to bring up to God the desires and prayers of Jesus and descending to serve him. It is included in the meaning that the angels were sent down to earth to serve Jesus from the time of his birth and to assist in his work between earth and heaven (Schnackenburg, 1980: 321). In his opinion, heaven opened at the starting point of Jesus' public ministry (Schnackenburg, 1980: 321). It can be concluded that Jesus tried to show Nathanael and the other disciples that his public ministry would be in communication with God. This conclusion is matched with another theme in John's gospel. In many places, Jesus says that he was sent by the Father, and he is performing God's will. In the diagram of the relationship between the Son and the Father, the communication between them is matched in *John's gospel*. However, there is no need for angels in the relationship between the Son and the Father in *John's gospel*. In many places, the unity of the Father and the Son is emphasised. The will of the Father is, at same time, the will of the Son, because the Son and the Father are one.

Another opinion about the ascending and descending is the realisation of the angels' function as divine messengers who come down to earth to carry the prayers of the people to God and thereafter, bring the answer of God back to the people (Westcott, 1908: 28) This is similar to Schnackenburg's (1980: 321) opinion, but the role of the angels is different. In Schnackenburg's opinion, the angels work between God and the Son of Man but according to Westcott (1908: 28), the work is between God and the people through the Son of Man. McGee ([1975]1991: 38) and Boice (1975: 770) also regarded the ladder as the symbol of Christ because Christ serves the role of a bridge connecting God in heaven and humans on earth. Even though there is no direct mention of the ladder in Jn 1:51, the Son of Man substituted the ladder. In the opinion of McGee ([1975] 1991: 38) and Boice (1975: 770), the role of the Son of Man and the angels can be differentiated. However, the role of the angels is not clear because there are no mediators between God and the people. According to McGee ([1975] 1991: 38) and Boice (1975: 770), the Son of Man is only a symbolical instrument for the angels to do the works of God. A more exact meaning of the role of the angels is to provide assistance to the Son of Man who, similar to a ladder, is the only mediator to connect heaven and earth.

There is another possible interpretation. The angels ascending and descending can be interpreted eschatologically within an apocalyptic framework. According to Revelation, the angels descend to bring the wrath of God to the world and in this, they alternate. This opinion is based on the other concepts in Jn.1:51 such as the open heaven and the Son of Man. The concept of the open heaven can be understood as an eschatological concept. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine the relationship between Jn 1:51 and the eschatological vision in *Revelation*.

### **Comparison between the *Ladder of Jacob* and *Revelation***

From the analysis of the motifs in Jn 1:51, it is ascertained that the quotation from Gn 28:12 in Jn 1:51 can be interpreted eschatologically in *Revelation*. This is further evidenced by the comparison between the *Ladder of Jacob* and *Revelation*, which demonstrates certain similarities. In the *Ladder of Jacob 2*, Jacob declares in his song that he saw the heavenly realm over the ladder. This is similar to the celestial realm that John saw in *Revelation 4*: there is an open door to heaven in Rev 4:1, and John ascended to heaven to see the celestial realm.

The similarities between the *Ladder of Jacob 2* and *Revelation 4* are presented below:

- The throne in heaven  
You who sit firmly on the cherubim and the fiery throne of glory. (LadJac 2:7)  
Behold, a throne was set in heaven, and *one* sat on the throne (Rev 4:2)
- The six wings  
Before the face of your glory the six-winged seraphim are afraid (LadJac 2:15)  
And the four beasts had each of them six wings about *him*; and *they were* full of eyes within (Rev 4:8)
- The hymn: Holy, Holy, Holy  
Holy, Holy, Holy, Yao, Yaova, Yaoil, Yao, Kados, Chavod, Savaoth (LadJac 2:18)  
They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come (Rev 4:8)

It cannot be stated that *Revelation* quoted Gn 28:12 directly due to the mention of certain motifs such as the open door in heaven (Rev 4:1; Rev 19:11). However, it is possible to connect Jn 1:51 and *Revelation*. Aune (2002b: 1052) indicates that it is a dramatic

expression of the parousia of Jesus because Jesus is accompanied by an angelic cavalry. Aune (2002b: 1052) also mentions Jn 1:51 as an early Christian example of the expression, "heaven open". He emphasised that the verb ἠνεωγμένη is a passive perfect to disclose divine activity (Aune, 2002a: 280). God opened the door to John to show him the kingdom of heaven (Rv 4:1). It is the same concept as in the *Ladder of Jacob*. Therefore, the open heaven could also be considered the instrument to show the heavenly realm to the people in Jn 1:51 (Steyn, 2015: 3). From this method of analysis, Jn 1:51 could be seen as a bridge between Gn 28:12 and *Revelation* using an eschatological reinterpretation.

## Conclusion

The result of this study determines that the *Ladder of Jacob* was written with an eschatological intention. Even though Jn 1:51 briefly used the motif in Jacob's dream, it demonstrates eschatological facts, and the concept of the open heaven confirms this. The *Ladder of Jacob 7* especially supplies the eschatological interpretation of Jn 1:51 because it was added by a Christian reader. Even though the concept of the open heaven is not mentioned directly, it is implied in LadJac 1:10: "Then the earth will be glorified, receiving heavenly glory". The *Ladder of Jacob* also interpreted Gn 28:12 with eschatology. In addition, similar descriptions about the heavenly realm that Jacob and John saw appear in the *Ladder of Jacob* and *Revelation*. These descriptions demonstrate the reinterpretation of Gn 28:12 in these two documents. In Jn 1:51, the reinterpretation of Gn 28:12 is presented through the accompanied motifs such as the open heaven and the Son of Man, and Jn 1:51 and Rev 4:1 use the same motif, the open heaven. Therefore, it is certain that Jn 1:51 and *Revelation* can be connected with eschatology.

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