

Stairway to Heaven

For those who were in their teens or early twenties during the 1970s and who weren't completely cut off from the mainstream of popular culture, there is perhaps no more recognizable tune than 1971's "Stairway to Heaven" by the blues-inflected hard-rockers, Led Zeppelin. The song seemed nearly ubiquitous in the years immediately after its release. Every garage band attempted to cover it; disc jockeys must have worn out multiple copies playing it on the radio and at dances. It seems to me that, even though it's actually impossible to dance to, it must have been the final song at every dance I attended as a teenager. It's hardly a typical rock and roll radio hit – it clocks in at a whopping 8:03 rather than the 3:05 that Billy Joel bitterly claimed a record had to be to make it on the radio and it veers wildly from acoustic guitar and flute with a whispery vocal to screaming electric guitars and voices and pounding drums and then back to a *cappella* voice. The lyrics are cryptic and fantastic. Yet "Stairway to Heaven" has retained its popularity over the decades. According to some, it is the most requested and most played song on FM radio and as recently as 2000, it was named #3 in VH1's list of the 100 Greatest Rock Songs.

So, what does this extravagant rock anthem have to do with the story of the Biblical Jacob at Bethel? Well, other than the central image, not much actually. But it does make a great lead in for a tired preacher trying to write the beginning of a sermon. And, believe it or not, I may actually suggest a couple of thematic parallels between the Genesis story and Robert Plant's lyrics as we progress through our study of the Scripture.

So, let's think about that central image for a moment. Contrary to traditional English translations of the passage, what Jacob dreams is almost certainly a stairway, not a ladder. One clue to this conclusion is found in his words upon awakening: "This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." "Gate of Heaven" is the literal meaning of the word Babylon, that great pagan city where humans first attempted to build a stairway to heaven, what we know as the Tower of Babel. That tower was almost certainly a ziggurat, a stepped pyramid that continued to be the primary form of temples in Babylon for centuries. Genesis tells us that God destroyed the Tower of Babel; human beings are not able to attain the divine through their own efforts. But here we have evidence that God provides a connection between Godself and humankind. The messengers of God come and go between God's presence and the Earth, constantly on their rounds to see that God's will is ultimately accomplished on Earth as it is in Heaven, though the consummation of God's plan has not yet come.

Rabbinic wisdom is often founded on great simplicity. Rabbi Yossy Goldman, a Brooklyn native now the president of the South African Rabbinical Association, poses what he calls in Yiddish a "*klotz kasha*," a simple question. "Do angels need a ladder?" he writes. "Everyone knows angels have wings... So, if you have wings, why would you need a ladder?" The answer, he writes, is one that should serve as a lesson to those who would aspire to live lives pleasing to God. "In climbing heavenward one does not necessarily need wings. Dispense with the dramatic. Forget about fancy leaps and bounds. There is a ladder, a spiritual route clearly mapped out for us; a route that needs to be traversed step-by-step, one rung at a time. The pathway to Heaven is gradual, methodical and eminently manageable." Rabbi Goldman is referring here to Torah and, while we would substitute the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles for that of Moses, the concept is nonetheless true. "Many people are discouraged from even beginning a spiritual journey," Goldman writes, "because they think it needs that huge leap of

Stairway to Heaven

faith. They cannot see themselves reaching a degree of religious commitment which to them seems otherworldly. And yet, with the gradual step-by-step approach, one finds that the journey can be embarked upon and that the destination aspired to is actually not in outer space.”

Rabbi Shai Held, the director of education and the Conservative Rabbinic Adviser at Harvard Hillel, favors the interpretation of the early Hasidic Master, Ephraim of Sudlikov. He found metaphoric meaning in the constant up and down travel of the angels as an image of the spiritual life of humans. “There are times,” Held writes, “when we are in "expanded consciousness" and feel a deep connection to God and Torah (we are, in those moments, "ascending the ladder"), but there are also times when we are afflicted by "contracted consciousness" and feel far away from God (we are then, of course, "descending the ladder"). There is nothing wrong with this up-and-down process, Ephraim assures us. It is an inherent piece of the spiritual life. In fact, it is crucial that we understand that our descents make possible fuller and deeper ascents. Just as in a human relationship, distance or crisis now can often lead to a more profound sense of connection and intimacy later; so in our relationship to God, a period of descent can culminate in a more genuine connection to God. This, Ephraim tells us, is ‘descent for the purpose of ascent.’”

Ephraim and Held’s idea that spiritual crisis leads to spiritual growth leads me to the two themes I wish to explore in the rest of our time together with this story. First, there is the realization that God is present for us even, or perhaps especially, when we are *in extremis*. Secondly, as has been so often the case in Genesis and is so often the case in our own lives, this is a story of God’s amazing grace to an individual who scarcely seems deserving of such love and favor.

Let’s reflect for a moment on how it is that Jacob, the heir of the promises of God to Abraham and Isaac, finds himself alone in a deserted place on the night of his dream. Jacob is on the run. You will remember that some years after Jacob had swindled Esau out of the older brother’s birthright in exchange for a bowl of beans, Jacob proceeded to deceive his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing intended for his older brother. In the aftermath of this latter crime, Scripture tells us: “Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, ‘The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.’” Fortunately for Jacob, the boys’ mother, Rebekah, hears of her older son’s anger. Once again, Esau’s impetuous nature is used against him. He has married two Canaanite women without his father’s consent and Rebekah reminds Isaac of this. “Then Rebekah said to Isaac, ‘I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?’” And so, Jacob is sent off to his uncle Laban’s house to find a wife with a better pedigree, obtaining yet another blessing from Isaac on his way out the door.

Despite the official excuse for his travel and his father’s renewed good will, there’s no doubt that Jacob is fleeing for his life. He must have thought that his cleverness and his mother’s scheming had set him up for life. To return for a moment to our other “Stairway to Heaven,” Jacob is like the lady in the first verse of Plant’s song, sure that he can get what he came for; through the gold of his shrewdness, he thinks he’s bought his stairway to heaven. Instead, he is a fugitive, friendless and alone, without even a place to stay for the night on his journey. For “a quiet man, living in tents,” his mother’s favorite, this must have been devastating. Jacob is far from the home he loves.

Stairway to Heaven

But Jacob is not far from the God whose promises he has inherited. A portion of our Psalm for this morning reveals a truth about God that Jacob learns at Bethel. “You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” Even in that wilderness place he later names “the house of God,” Jacob sees in his dream that God is standing right next to him.

It is to Jacob at the end of his rope that God appears. It is a good and comforting thing for us to remember. Truly there is nowhere we can go, no situation we can be in, where God is not standing right beside us. We are the heirs, through the adoption of Christ, to God’s promise to Jacob, “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.” And because we are heirs through Christ Jesus, we can also know that there is nothing that we can suffer, no loneliness, no rejection, no pain, not even death, that Jesus has not already suffered and has not already overcome for our sake. We cannot run so far that we have run away from God; we cannot flee from God’s presence nor hide from God’s spirit of love. “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That is how Paul puts it in the magnificent conclusion to chapter eight of the Epistle to the Romans.

What would you have said to Jacob, if you were God and found him out there that night? Would you have pointed out to him that his troubles were his own darn fault? Would you have given him “what for” for cheating his not-so-smart brother and tricking his old blind father? Perhaps you would have at least pointed out to him, in Robert Plant’s words from that song, “there are two paths you can go by... there’s still time to change the road you’re on.” In God’s unending, never-failing grace, God says none of this to the sleeping reprobate. All God does is to renew and deepen the promise: “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Many commentators over the centuries have pointed out that the language of God’s more personal promise to Jacob, “I am with you and will keep you,” is both a reversal of Cain’s defensive retort, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” and a foreshadowing of the great Aaronic blessing, “the Lord bless you and keep you.” God is faithful even when humankind is not. It is also worth noting that this is the first time that God has given the assurance, “I am with you,” words later repeated by God to some of the children of Israel in times of crisis: to Moses, when he is commissioned by God at the burning bush; to Joshua, when he assumes leadership of the Exodus tribes; to Gideon, as he prepares to free the children of Israel from the Midianites. And

Stairway to Heaven

then there is the promise of the one we know as Immanuel, God With Us, Jesus, who said to his disciples and, by extension, to us: "I am with you always, even unto the end of the Earth."

Should we doubt that God's promise to Jacob also carries good news for us, it is made clear in God's words: "all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring." Dr. Esther Menn points out that when God promises Jacob that his "offspring shall be like the dust of the earth," God is not simply promising a countless multitude. "The Hebrew word translated as "dust," she says, "can refer to "topsoil," the rich layer of loose dirt that supports plant growth and sustains life... Jacob's descendants become the topsoil that benefits the families dwelling on the land. God promises that Jacob's flight and the migration of his descendants in every direction will be a rich source of blessing for all whom they encounter."

God renews the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac and even extends a new, personal promise to Jacob regardless of Jacob's scheming and double-dealing. And it's not as if Jacob lived a perfect life after his encounter with the living God at Bethel, although his apologists will certainly say that Laban provoked him and deserved the shrewdness with which Jacob enriched himself at Laban's expense. We'll come back to that story in a couple of weeks. But I am reminded that God has been equally as gracious with me and, dare I say, with us. As Paul wrote in that brilliant letter to the Romans: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." If you'll allow me to stretch the point one more time, there are lines in "Stairway to Heaven" that, although I am sure Robert Plant didn't mean them this way, remind me of the gift of the Holy Spirit to us while we still walk in darkness: "And as we wind on down the road / Our shadows taller than our souls; / There walks a lady we all know / Who shines white light and wants to show / How ev'rything still turns to gold."

I've been a little tongue-in-cheek this morning about the connection between the two versions of "Stairway to Heaven," but there is a more serious and beautiful poem inspired by this story that I'd like you to hear. I found it while doing my reading this week. It was written by The Rev. Sheila Nelson-McJilton, Assistant Rector of Christ Church Parish, Kent Island, in Stevensville, Maryland, and it's titled "Who Sleep on Holy Stones":

Bearer of curse and blessing,
I left home to stumble into the desert.
Exhausted and empty,
I watch fierce sun set over silent stones.
Stars ascend towards midnight,
The wind moans through desert canyons,
And clouds drift across a full moon like shimmering angels.
Broken and empty, I come to you, O Lord God.
In a desert midnight,
There is no smell of blessed fields
No grain
No wine
No fatness of earth

Stairway to Heaven

No sweet dew of heaven.
Alone, I sleep on holy stones,
Under stars that blaze fierce and countless as dust.
The wind moans high above me, through desert canyons.
Clouds veil the moon.
Strong, shining faces of angels appear.
Michael
Gabriel
Raphael
Lean down to earth.
Their glittering swords carve stones into steps to heaven.
Angels descend in silence to gaze into my face.
Angels ascend in silence to bear my deceit away.
Then in a shimmering, celestial dance
Of turning wings
Swirling wings
They sweep aside clouds.
I see a heavenly host as countless as dust.
I hear a heavenly host, their voices joined by joyous stars.
Glory to God in the highest.
And on earth... peace.
Their alleluias echoing high above desert canyons,
The Holy One descends from the gate of heaven
To stand beside my stone pillow,
To wrap my empty fears
In an eternal mantle of blessing,
To hallow the ground on which I sleep.
Michael veils the moon with his wings,
And the only light I see is God.
I left home, soul that raged with wild emptiness
And in this desert wilderness,
Angels carve holy names for sleep.
They dance a path between me and You, O Lord God.
You have found me, broken and empty,
On holy stones that ascend to the very gates of heaven
And you have not cursed me.
In a desert midnight, I know
The smell of blessed fields
Grain
I will tell of You, O Lord God,
To laughing children who bless my tent,
To strong children who become tribes as countless as dust
I will tell them of desert midnights filled with blazing stars
Of fierce angels who carve holy stones
And dance with glittering swords among clouds,
Of hymns sung by joyous stars over Bethel

Stairway to Heaven

And over Bethlehem.

Jacob said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” We come to this place every week hoping for a special taste of the presence of God in our lives; to feel the sweet, sweet Spirit of God that lifts us up and binds us together. We come and we pray, “Guide us, Yahweh, our God. We are pilgrims; we feel lost too much of the time. Heal us, protect us, feed our souls for You are the Bread of Heaven. And, like Jacob, we will promise to follow You, to let You be our God, just as You want to be, just as You meant to be.” We come to this place each week to feel the reality that Christ is beside us, every step of our lives, every rung of the ladder, and we pray, “Draw us nearer to You, O God. We are prone to wander but hem us in with Your love. Search us, O God, and know our hearts; test us and know our thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting.” Amen.