

Symbolism of the Ladders

By Leon Zeldis

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The ladder is a symbol that appears frequently in religious and esoteric contexts since ancient times. It features prominently in the tracing board of the First Degree (Jacob's Ladder), and it is also an important symbol both in the Second Degree (the spiral staircase), and in the Thirtieth Degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, Knight Kadosh, (the two-sided ladder).

From remote antiquity, the ladder was taken as a paradigm of spiritual ascent. In a bas-relief from the third dynasty of Ur, dated ca. 2070–1960 bce, there appears a seven-rung ladder “suggesting initiation leading from lower to higher realms of consciousness; above the initiate is the conjunction of a crescent moon and sun, symbolizing the union of masculine and feminine principles as the central meaning of initiation.”

We find here the core of an explanation for the use of the ladder as a symbol in the First Degree of Freemasonry, in preference to others.

The source of the connection made

in Freemasonry between the ladder and the moral virtues can be traced back to the Greek philosophers: Man's arduous ascent to God is represented by a ladder. John Klimakos (died ca. 600 and whose name means “John of the Ladder”) laid the foundation for this graduated conception, rooted in Neo-Platonism. The starting point of this “ascent to Paradise” is Jacob's dream. Man's task is . . . to overcome his sinful desires, then to achieve the virtues, if he wishes to attain in the end the topmost rung and there join the Pauline trinity of virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity.

The theme of a spiritual ladder is closely connected with the idea of human perfectibility, best expressed in Pico della Mirandola's Oratorio de Hominis Dignitate (1486), where Pico imagines the voice of God saying: We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lowest forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power, out of thy soul's judgment, to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.

In other words, the ascending and descending angels on Jacob's Ladder are representations of the soul's capacity to rise or fall along the Chain of Being. As Jean Farre explains: the ladder is a bridge between earth and heaven; it enables man to rise in the realm of knowledge and access

the sacred . . . Further, the ladder expresses man's search in his aspiration for progress. In this case, the movement is ascending. However, the movement can also be descending. Man starts then looking for his deep roots, his unconscious, and even hidden knowledge. We could speak here of a descent to the underworld, in order to unveil all secrets, the mysteries that are in man. The ladder then reaches down to the bowels of the earth.

As explained by Wells, The images of ladder, scale and chain are found universally in medieval and Renaissance art, because the cosmos was conceived as a series of interlocking hierarchies. The concept of “the Great Chain of Being” expresses the order and harmony of the cosmos. This image was conflated with two others: the Golden Chain of Zeus (Illiad, VIII, 19–27) and Jacob's Ladder.

The visionary ladder upon which the sleeping Jacob sees angels ascending and descending was widely interpreted as a symbol of cosmic harmony. Peter Sterry wrote in 1675: “All ranks and degrees of Being so become, like the mystical steps in the scale of Divine Harmony and Proportions, Jacob's Ladder.”

Since we have been dealing with Jacob's Ladder and its spiritual connections, it would be convenient to go back to the Biblical origin of this image. Here is a retelling of the pertinent passages: Jacob leaves Beersheba to go to Haran. The sun sets while he is on the way, so he decides to spend the night at a certain place, takes

a stone and uses it as a pillow. During his sleep, he dreams that he sees a stairway or ladder, the Hebrew word accepts both translations, resting on the earth and reaching heaven, and angels of God ascending and descending on it. On top is God, telling Jacob that He is the Lord, God of his father Abraham and God of Isaac. God further promises Jacob to give him and his descendants the land on which he is lying and makes other generous promises. (Genesis 28:10–13). The next morning, Jacob is struck with awe at what he had experienced, and concludes the place is holy: “the house of God, the gate of heaven.” He takes the stone he had used as a pillow, sets it up as a pillar and pours oil on top, that is, makes it into an altar. And the Bible states that Jacob called the place Bethel (“House of God”), “though the city used to be called Luz.”

Luz in all Latin-derived languages has the meaning of “light.” Although the Hebrew name means “almond” or “hazelnut,” as a verb it means “to turn aside, to depart,” and also “to speak evil, to slander.” This strange passage in the Biblical text can then be explained as a way of saying that Jacob decides to turn aside from evil thoughts and take the first steps of ascent through the “Gate of Heaven.”

An interesting explanation of the place of Jacob's Ladder in Masonic symbolism was advanced by Bro. Sir John Cockburn:

The ladder has ever been a prominent Symbol in Masonry. It is drawn on the Tracing Boards and, as the Ladder of

Perfection, it is a conspicuous object in the higher degrees of the Ancient and Accepted Rite. From time immemorial it has been employed as the symbol of progressive ascent on the Intellectual, Moral and Spiritual planes. The number of steps varies from three upwards. The ladder reaches from Earth to Heaven, and it is thus a type of the Union of the Terrestrial and Celestial Kingdoms, and of the atonement between God and man, which throughout the ages has been the constant theme of the Mysteries, as well as of Philosophy and Religion.

Masonic historians, however, seem to agree that Jacob’s Ladder is of relatively recent appearance as a Masonic symbol. No mention of it can be found in the oldest documentary evidence relating to our Craft. Bro. Harry Carr has written that he believes Jacob’s Ladder to be “of mid or late-eighteenth century introduction, because there is no trace of it in the earlier rituals,” without advancing any more precise date. Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia proposes a date “as late as the early nineteenth century.”

The great Masonic scholar Mackey declares that in the Ancient Craft degrees of the York Rite, Jacob’s Ladder was not an original symbol. It is said to have been introduced by Dunckerley when he reformed the lectures. This is confirmed by the fact that it is not mentioned in any of the early rituals of the last century, not even by Hutchinson ... Its first appearance is in a tracing board on which the date of 1760

is inscribed, which very well agrees with the date of Dunckerley’s improvements. In this Tracing Board, the ladder has but three rounds; a change from the old seven-stepped ladder of the mysteries – which, however, Preston corrected when he described it as having “many rounds, but three principal ones.”

In the First Book of Kings, chap. 6 verse 8, we read: “The entrance to the middle chamber was on the south corner of the temple; a spiral stairway [in Hebrew: belulim] led up to the middle level and from there to the third.” The Masonic tradition is different in the various rituals. In Emulation, the Middle Chamber is the place where the Fellow Craft received their wages, while in the Scottish Rite tradition, the Middle Chamber is the meeting place of Master Masons. The spiral stairway, however, supports both traditions.

We must come to the conclusion that the use of Jacob’s Ladder may have started around the middle of the eighteenth century, but its use did not become generalized until the beginning of the nineteenth century, more or less coinciding with the formative years of the Union* (1813), at the time when the rituals used by both grand lodges were being compared and a unified ritual was being worked out.

* Formation of the United Grand Lodge of England

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