

Gen 28:10–22 in Ancient Jewish and Christian Reception

The peaceful coexistence of Judaism and Christianity requires mutual knowledge of important traditions of the other. The reception of biblical texts and traditions always concerns one's own experience of religious community, with its self-understanding, and often also with a sometimes very problematic need for separation from other groups. Ancient Christian tradition often has to be critically evaluated in order to prevent modern political-ideological misuse. On the other hand, the differentiated perception of both one's own and other traditions can provide an impulse for appropriate understanding of the texts. As a small token of respect for József Szécsi and his meritorious work for the peaceful coexistence of the two religions in Hungary, this contribution may therefore be well appreciated. The comparison of both Jewish¹ and Christian reception² is the rationale for this study.

1. Observations on Textual History

The following observations on textual history are relevant in different ways for interpretation.

Whether the angels descend on the ladder or on Jacob is unclear, the conclusion of Gen 28:12 (בּו) leaves both possibilities open. The reference to Jacob is present in GenR 69:3 and is also presupposed in John 1:51,³ but, according to GenR 68:13, an allegorical interpretation is necessary: the ascending angels exalt Jacob, as it is also said in Isa 49:3, while the descending angels humble him.⁴ Gen 28:13 contains the same ambiguity in

¹ STEMBERGER, "Patriarchenbilder," 110–122; THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 55–65.

² Gahbauer, "Jakobsleiter," 247–278. Zeno of Verona and Caesarius of Arles dedicated special homilies to this text (Zeno of Verona, *Tract.* 1:37, CCSL 22:101–104; Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 87, CCSL 103:357–361). As far as I can see, there is rarely any reference to Jacob in antique anti-Christian criticism. Here, Jacob's temporary status as a slave becomes an indication of a lack of noble descent of the Jewish people (COOK, *Interpretation*, 287).

³ The history of the reception of John 1:51 is incomplete, even where the story of the Jacob's ladder is discussed.

⁴ GenR 69:3, Neusner, 18.

the Hebrew preposition עליו, and again the necessity of the interpretation is clear: God's being "with Jacob" means divine protection.

In the Greek as well as in the Latin textual tradition this ambiguity is no longer found; here the reference to the ladder is clear. Especially for the Latin textual history of Gen 28:12f., John 1:51 does not influence the rendering of the preposition ἐπί.⁵

In the Septuagint, the injunction "Do not be afraid!" is inserted into God's speech in Gen 28:13 as God's reaction to the fear of the addressee of a theophany, which is not explicit in the text at this point. From a literary point of view, it is supposed to enable the continuation of the event, and from an interpretational point of view, it is supposed to underline the salvific nature of encountering God. However, a specific history of the effect of this formula within Gen 28:13 cannot be determined.

2. The Distinct Elements of the Story

2.1. Jacob's Arrival (Gen 28:10f.)

Jewish tradition considers the circumstances of Jacob's arrival at the place of the event⁶ and the identity of that place itself.

According to GenR 68:10, God let the sun set before speaking with Jacob in the dark, in secret. The starting point of this event is the understanding of the phrase in the sense "He met with the Eternal." The understanding of מקום as a circumlocution for God is already attested in Philo of Alexandria (*Somn.* 1:63f.). The interpretation occurs also in GenR 68:9: God is the place of the world (not vice versa),⁷ because the world has its existence in him. The term פגע (to meet, to come together) was soon understood in the sense of "praying," probably because of Jer 7:16; 27:18; Gen 23:8.⁸ Abraham is said to have instituted morning prayer, Isaac afternoon prayer,

⁵ In Gen 28:12, *per illam* and *super illam* dominate in the *Vetus Latina*, in v. 13 *super illam* and *in illam*, unless a preposition is dispensed with altogether because of the compound *innixum*. The preposition *ad* is not attested in manuscripts of Gen 28:12f. The divergence of the translations may have two reasons: 1. the preposition ἐπί is constructed with the genitive in Gen 28:12, but with the accusative in John 1:51; 2. the preposition has an object as its referent in Gen 28:12^{LXX}, a person in John 1:51.

⁶ The destination of Jacob's journey can be interpreted allegorically as to exile; the background is the similarity of Haran to חרון in Lam 1:12 (GenR 68:13, Neusner, 14–15) and the biblical identification of Jacob with Israel.

⁷ The antithesis that the world is the place of God is rejected with reference to Exod 33:21; Deut 33:27; the positive proof for the thesis is given with Ps 90:1.

⁸ THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 55. For this interpretation cf. also Aphrahat, *De oratione* 5 (SHERIDAN, *Genesis 12–50*, 188).

and Jacob evening prayer.⁹ Already in bSanh 95b it is claimed that the evening prayer of Jacob was so pleasing to God that he led Jacob back from Haran to Beth-El and granted him the miracle of premature sunset. But the fact that the sun sets has also been interpreted as an omen of the exile – in connection with the fact, of course, that exile is followed by the return to the Promised Land.¹⁰

The understanding of the “place” as Christ in the interpretation of an unknown author is no real analogy; the author comes to this interpretation via John 14:6 and John 10:9.¹¹ The “door,” referring to the gate of heaven, prompted this interpretation.

Very late in Christian tradition it is asked why Jacob spends the night in the open. Peter Comestor gives a psychological answer: Jacob was afraid to go to a resident of the province with whom he would have to expect hostility due to previous conflicts (cf. Gen 26:19–21).¹²

The place of Jacob’s vision is sometimes identified in Jewish tradition with the Temple Mount,¹³ in Christian tradition with the place of the later erection of the Tabernacle.¹⁴ According to later Jewish legend, it was God’s intention not to let Jacob pass the site of the future temple without staying; he was to stay at least one night.¹⁵

2.2. *The Stone (Gen 28:11)*

The phrase *מֵאֲבְנֵי וִיקָח* in Gen 28:11 allows for discussion in Jewish traditions about the number of stones that Jacob actually took. Thus on the one hand there is a reference to twelve stones, which corresponds to the number of the twelve tribes of Israel,¹⁶ while on the other hand there is a reference to four stones, but these also have to do with the birth of Israel, as the

⁹ GenR 68:9, Neusner, 7f., referring to Gen 19:27; Ps 106:30 for morning prayer; Gen 24:63; Ps 142:3 for afternoon prayer and Gen 28:10; Jer 7:16 for evening prayer.

¹⁰ GenR 68:10, Neusner, 9, referring to Jer 15:9 and Mal 3:20, where the keyword “sun” is included.

¹¹ Procopius of Gaza, *In Gen.*, GCS NF 22:341. A reference to John 10:9 is also given by Aphrahat (GRYPEOU/SPURLING, *Book of Genesis*, 311).

¹² Peter Comestor, *Historia scholastica* Gen. 73, PL 198:1114c.

¹³ PRE 35 (ET FRIEDLAENDER, 263). GenR 69:7, Neusner, 22, contains a discussion in this regard: according to R. Jose b. Zimra the ladder stood at Beersheba, and the top of the ladder over the temple; “full of...” proves the latter. According to R. Judah b. R. Simon, the ladder stood at the later Temple site, but the top over Bethel, because Jacob named the site of God’s revelation Bethel (Gen. 28:19). The Midrash mentions another tradition, based on Ps 68:36; Lam 5:17; Ps 147:13: Jacob is shown the construction, destruction and rebuilding of the Temple.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Quaest. Gen.* 83, CCSL 33:32.

¹⁵ GINZBERG, *Legends*, 350.

¹⁶ GenR 68:11, Neusner 9; PRE 35, Friedlander, 264.

four stones, according Targum Jonathan I Gen 28,12, symbolize the four wives of Jacob, with whom he had his twelve sons.

In bChul 91b it is emphasized that the stones “united into one stone.” This rests on a tension that the biblical text provides: “and he took of the stones of the place” (Gen 28:11), and “he took the stone” (Gen 28:18). In the Midrash Haggadol to the Pentateuch it is said: “All the Israelites together will be all righteous and will all be one heart together.”¹⁷

In Christian tradition, the phrase *מאבני ויקח* did not warrant attention; nor does reference to the land like the people of Israel play any role. For Clement of Alexandria, the fact that Jacob lies down on a stone is a sign of an exemplary simple lifestyle.¹⁸ Other authors, however, give the stone other meanings. Cyprian shows that Christ can also be called “stone” with Isa 28:16; Ps 117:22–26; Zech 3:8f.; Deut 27:8; Josh 24:26f.; Acts 4:8, 12; and finally with Gen 28:11 (Jacob lays down the stone for his head), which is made serviceable to this interpretation via the keyword *caput* and 1Cor 11:3 (The head of the man is Christ).¹⁹ Augustine also formulates succinctly: *Et lapis ad caput, quia caput uiri Christus. Et unctus lapis* (Gen 28,18), *quia a chrismate dictus est Christus*.²⁰ The stone that Jacob erects in the *sacramentum* and anoints with oil is, according to QuodvultDeus, Christ the cornerstone, also mentioned in Ps 117:22; Is 28:16. This cornerstone Christ explained to Nathanael, when he came to him, the dream that Jacob had seen: You will see, he says, the heavens open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. For he who descended is Christ himself, and also he who ascended above all heavens that he might fulfill all things (Eph 4:10). But he has set as a guide the narrow way that leads to life.²¹ According to Cyril of Alexandria, the stone, symbolizing Christ, “had been sprinkled with oil, just as Immanuel was anointed by the Father ‘with the oil of gladness above his fellows’” (Ps 45:7).²²

¹⁷ Midrasch Haggadol on the Pentateuch, MARGUIES, 500, cf. STEMBERGER, “Patriarchenbilder,” 113.

¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2:78.3, GCS 12:205.

¹⁹ Cyprian, *Quir.* 2:16, CCSL 3:52. The identification of the stone as Christ is based on Dan 2:34 in JUSTIN, *Dial.* 76.1, Bobichon I, 392, on Zech 3:9 in Jerome, *Ep.* 108.13, CSEL 55:322, on Ps 117:22 in Jerome, *Tract Ps.* 133, CCSL 78:292, and in the Scholia in Concilium Aquileiense Fol 50r, CCSL 87:61, and is attested e.g. also in Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 87.2, CCSL 103:358.

²⁰ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 44 :20, CCSL 38:508. Aphrahat points to Lk 3:8 for the fact that believers can also be called “stone” (cf. Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50*, 188).

²¹ QuodvultDeus, *Lib. prom.* 1.32, CCSL 60:40f. Regrettably, Jerome lapses again into anti-Jewish polemics when he refers to the “stone of stumbling” that Christ represents for the Jews who do not believe in him (*Tract. Ps.* 119, CCSL 78:248).

²² GRYPEOU/SPURLING, *Book of Genesis*, 312.

2.3. *Jacob's Sleep*

Some Christian theologians interpret Jacob's sleep as evidence of his calm conscience.²³ Within art, Jacob is depicted for the first time on the northern wall of the synagogue of Dura Europos, as well as in the catacomb on the *Via Latina* in Rome, built in the fourth century and discovered in 1955/1956.²⁴

2.4. *Jacob's Dream – Prerequisite and Purpose of the Vision*

The question of what truth content dreams can have is not discussed. Occasionally reference is made to the frightening nature of the dream.²⁵ The interpretation of Gen 28 is not influenced by common ancient or Christian dream theory, for example in Tertullian or Nemesius of Emesa. Both Jewish and Christian tradition rather comment on the question as to whether Jacob, in light of his behavior, was at all worthy of God's appearance and promise of assistance.

Already the *Wisdom of Solomon* (Sap 10:10–12) puts an emphasis on the preservation of “the righteous one” from the revenge of his brother and the greed of the stronger and from his enemies.²⁶ Philo of Alexandria also sees justification but discusses it as early as Gen 27:31, where Esau is not reported to have prepared a meal to Isaac's liking, unlike what is reported in Genesis. For Philo of Alexandria, this is again a testimony of the scriptures in favor of Jacob against Esau.²⁷ Especially in an environment in which Jews have to defend themselves again and again because of their self-distinction from other nations and have to defend themselves against defamation, such a portrayal of Jacob is important. In contrast, when dealing with Esau, every detail of the Bible text is turned against him.²⁸ In later Jewish tradition, the problem of Jacob's worthiness is occasionally discussed in relation to the promise of assistance addressed to Jacob (see below).

²³ Ambrose, *De Iacob* 2:4/16, SC 534:430: *Et profectus est Iacob et dormivit, quid est quieti animi iudicium*. Cyprianus Gallus, *Heptateuchos*, 915f., CSEL 23:35: *Ac dum securo refovetur (refresh) membra sopore / aspicit intrepidus toto de lumine mentis...*

²⁴ STEMBERGER, “Patriarchenbilder,” 110; THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 55. – While most depictions show the patriarch asleep, in the painting of the aforementioned catacomb he is depicted as awake (Kauffmann, “Jakob,” 373).

²⁵ Cyprianus Gallus, *Heptateuchos* 928, CSEL 23:35: *illi somnum ingens rumpit pavor ossaque tota concutit umenti perfundens membra fluore*.

²⁶ There were also other reasons to devalue Esau. In 4Q222 Frgm. 1 = Jub 29:9–12 the patriarch Jacob is praised for not having taken a non-Israelite wife, unlike Esau.

²⁷ Philo of Alexandria, *Qu. Gen.* 4:221, Marcus, 519.

²⁸ BÖHM, *Rezeption*, 390 fn. 303.

Why was Jacob worthy of the vision? Ambrose justifies it with Jacob's voluntary exile, which mitigates his guilt *and* prevents Esau's guilt.²⁹ John Chrysostom refers to the philosophical attitude of the patriarch, which is noticeable in his frugality (he travels alone, without servants, etc.).³⁰ The philanthropic God intervenes because Jacob has to go this way due to the advice of his mother, out of fear of his brother, and without being able to hope for earthly help he is dependent on heavenly assistance.³¹

What was the purpose of the vision? Christian authors formulate divergent answers: they understood the vision as an instruction that God dwells in heaven but fills the whole earth,³² that nothing happens without the will of God,³³ or that Jacob should trust the divine *προμήθεια* (providence).³⁴

2.5. *The Ladder (Gen 28:12)*

Philo of Alexandria regards the ladder as a symbol for the air as the dwelling place of incorporeal beings, but then also for the soul. The ascending *logoi* of God separate man from everything mortal, while the descending *logoi* serve to vitalize the soul with the presence of the divine according to Lev 26:12. The ladder also symbolizes life as such with its alternately successful striving for virtue, as is characteristic according to the philosophy of the Academy (though not that of Stoicism) for those who are not completely perfect, but also not completely bad.³⁵

Genesis Rabbah 68:12 cites the view that מִלְּךָ “ladder of heaven” means Sinai, the top of which, according to Deut 4:11, rises “to the heart of heaven.” The “angels of God” are Moses and Aaron. The ladder is equated with the Torah, which Moses received at Sinai, to characterize it as a bridge between heaven and earth.

The moral-allegorical interpretation just mentioned is repeated in Christianity, as a general determination of piety³⁶ and asceticism³⁷ as well as an allusion to the infinite ascent of the soul to God described in the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–10).³⁸ Ephraem the Syrian in one of his ‘Hymns on the Feast of

²⁹ Ambrose, *De Iacob* 2:1.1, SC 534:410. Jacob realized what is said in Ps 1:1f. (Ambrose, *De Iacob* 2:1.2, SC 534:412).

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 44.3, PG 54:475.

³¹ John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 44.3, PG 54:475f.

³² Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaph. Gen.* 4:3, PG 69:188c, also in Procopius of Gaza, *In Gen.*, GCS NF 22:340.

³³ Gennadius, *Frgm. Gen.*, PG 85:1649bc.

³⁴ Theodoret, *Qu. Gen.* 84, OECT:166.

³⁵ Philo, *Somn.* 1:134, 147, 150.

³⁶ Maximus Confessor, *Qu.* 88, CCSG 10:68.

³⁷ Benedict of Nursia, *Reg.* 7.5f., CSEL 75:40.

³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beat.* 5, proem., GNO 7/2:123f.; Chromatius, *Serm.* 41,10, CCSL 9 A:179.

Epiphany' compares Jesus on the day of his baptism in the Jordan with Jacob's ladder, because he united the water on earth with the gate of heaven.³⁹ Where the ladder symbolizes the cross of Christ, the soteriological or the ethical aspect of the cross can be in the foreground.⁴⁰

Such allegorical interpretation can also be seen in modern times beyond a religious context. Thus, according to Arnold Schönberg in his oratorio fragment "Jacob's Ladder," the ladder was designed with the help of esoteric, especially theosophical traditions, and stands for the post-mortal ascent of humankind to God; Jacob himself is not mentioned.⁴¹ The text was written under the influence of the circle of Wassily Kandinsky and Gustav Mahler long before Schönberg's conscious return to the Jewish faith and his re-entry into the Jewish community in 1933.⁴²

The painting "Jacob's Ladder" (1987) by Ernesto Weber (1925–2008) is striking in its color scheme in that the dark colors are to be found less on Jacob's side than on the side of heaven. Is this an autobiographical reference to his blindness, which weighed heavily on him as he once again turned to painting? Sergei Tihomirov (*1965 in Moscow, now living in Hanover) has repeatedly linked the themes of "ladder to heaven" and "Menorah" in such a way that the outlines of the menorah become visible at the top of the ladder to heaven.

In Anselm Kiefer's work (*1945 in Donaueschingen, Germany), the multiple re-reception of the motif of the ladder to heaven serves as a critical statement on German history after 1933. In his work "Seraphim" (1983–1984), the still unbroken ladder, painted in black, rises above scorched earth; at the foot of the ladder lies a snake. In several works entitled "Dream of Jacob" (most recently 2010), he depicts the ladder as a multiply broken ladder in red paint, connecting two spaces that are not set off from each other in terms of color. In view of the artist's very critical distancing from the Nazi era, this type of representation can be interpreted in two ways: it can reflect the suffering of Israel as well as the dark sides of Christian and especially German tradition, the uncritical affirmation of which is no longer permissible.

Examples of ironic distance from the usual art business are provided by the artist duo "Zweintopf" (Eva and Gerhard Pichler from Styria). Their installation "Jacob's Ladder," 23 meters long, was installed in 2010 in the

³⁹ GRYPEOU/SPURLING, Book of Genesis, 308, referring to Ephraem, *Hymn. Epiphan.* 11.11.

⁴⁰ Irenaeus, *Dem.* 45, SC 406:148–150; Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3:24.10, CCSL 1:543. "The symbolism of the ladder as the cross was also popular in the Syriac tradition" (GRYPEOU/SPURLING, Book of Genesis, 309, referring to Aphrahat, *The Cave of Treasures* 31.17–18, and Jacob of Sarug).

⁴¹ WÖRNER, "Musik," 174f.

⁴² STRECKER, *Gott*, 121.

lightwell of an old building in Vienna and an electric current passed through it, which was probably intended to symbolize the danger of all claims to authority that arise from an appeal to dream revelations from heaven. The 23 meters may be taken as an indication of the deficiency of human knowledge, which does not reach perfection (represented by the number 24).

2.6. Angels, Ascending and Descending (Gen 28:12)

The background of the explanations discussed in the following is often that the ascent is mentioned before the descent, which does not fit with inhabitants of heaven. In the Jewish tradition the ascending angels may put one in mind of the angels who accompanied Jacob on his journey within Israel and now return to heaven. The descending angels are those who will accompany him outside the land of Israel.⁴³ Some Christian authors therefore interpret the ἄγγελοι with reference to Ps 81[82]:6f. as humans, because angels were never on the earth before.⁴⁴ Other authors quote a reading that offers the reverse order (descent and ascent) as *lectio facilior*.⁴⁵

2.6.1. Literal Interpretation

Jacob, according to Jewish tradition, saw the ministering angels,⁴⁶ but also in Christian tradition it is said that he saw the angels.⁴⁷ In Jewish tradition it can be maintained that the ministering angels wanted to endanger Jacob (in GenRabba as in bChul 91b). The envy of the angels for humanity is the basic concept for this interpretation of Gen 28:12.⁴⁸ In MHG Gen 28:13; YalqGen 119, it is not ministering angels but demons against whom God provides protection.⁴⁹ These motifs have not come to my attention from Christian tradition so far.

⁴³ GenR 68:12, Neusner, 13. Sometimes it is asked why the angels were on earth at all before the event described in Gen 28:10–22: they were driven from their heavenly places for 138 years because they had betrayed secrets of God to men.

⁴⁴ Zeno of Verona, *Tract.* 1:37,4/11, CCSL 22:103.

⁴⁵ The order *descendentes et ascendentes* is not attested in the manuscripts but in Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin* 5:20, SC 448:132; Benedict of Nursia, *Reg.* 7.6–9, CSEL 75:40f.; Cyprianus Gallus, *Heptateuchos* 915f., CSEL 23:35.

⁴⁶ PRE 35, Friedlander, 265.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Tract Ev. Io.* 7,23, CCSL 36:80; *Quaest. Gen.* 84, CCSL 33:32; similarly En. Ps. 44.20, CCSL 38:508; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 44.3, PG 54:475; Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaph. Gen.* 4:3, PG 69:188c–189a; Theodoret, *Qu. Gen.* 84, OECT:166. Cyril and Theodoret think of the angels who, according to Heb 1:14, are sent by God to support the pious.

⁴⁸ STEMBERGER, “Patriarchenbilder,” 115; SCHÄFER, *Rivalität*, 205.

⁴⁹ THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 63f.

Only in this literal line of interpretation does one find the motif that the angels recognize in the sleeping Jacob the human face of the throne chariot described in Ezek 1.⁵⁰ The tradition-historical basis of this interpretation is Isa 49:3: “Israel, my servant, in whom I will glorify myself.”⁵¹ Jacob is thus to be seen as the “personal summary of the people of the God of Israel.”⁵² From this basis, the textual-pragmatic function of such an identification also becomes clear: it is grateful astonishment at the election of Israel.

2.6.2. *Figurative Interpretation*

Within the figurative interpretation,⁵³ one can still distinguish positive or negative figures in the Jewish and Christian tradition.

In the first line of interpretation, in Jewish tradition, Moses and Aaron⁵⁴ are mentioned, or Elijah and Jonah,⁵⁵ or Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah in the fiery furnace.⁵⁶ Sometimes the ascending and descending angels are said to be the priests in the temple.⁵⁷ The biblical basis of the comparison of angels and priests is Mal 2:7, and of the place of Jacob with Jerusalem in Amos 9:1 (“I saw God standing on the altar”). The traditional basis is furthermore the afore-mentioned idea that Jacob had his dream at the site of the future temple mount.⁵⁸

In Jewish tradition, the angels are also sometimes interpreted as “princes,” i.e., as representatives of non-Israelite political powers. This tradition can be updated in various ways. In ExodRabbah 32:7 (on Exod 23:21), Jacob himself is subsequently told to ascend. For fear of falling again, similar to the princes, he does not dare. YalqGen 121 applies this tradition to

⁵⁰ TgNeophiti Gen 28,12; Targum Ps.-Jonathan II Gen 28,12. Jerome, *In Ez.*, CCSL 75:14, refers to an interpretation of a certain Catina, esteemed by the Syrians but otherwise unknown, which he reproduces by *faciemque hominis refert ad totum Israel, leonis d regale sceptrum Iudae, uitulii ad sacerdotalem et leviticam tribum, extra quae sit aquila uindicta et ultio Dei de caelo cuncta prospieicnes.*

⁵¹ Also in GenR 68:12, Neusner 13; YalqGen 119, Gen 28:12 is combined with Isa 49:3.

⁵² THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 62. According to Jub 1:26, Abraham recognizes the Jacob’s Godlikeness. In the *Oratio Joseph*, Jacob is the highest angel of heaven; he is pre-existent (THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 22).

⁵³ I owe the following collection of references again to STEMBERGER, “Patriarchenbilder,” 118.

⁵⁴ GenR 68:12, Neusner, 12, on the basis of Exod 19:3, 14.

⁵⁵ Midrasch Haggadol 503 on Gen 28:12.

⁵⁶ GenR 68:13, Neusner, 14), on Gen 28:12.

⁵⁷ Sifre Num 18:20, Horovitz, 143.

⁵⁸ STEMBERGER, “Patriarchenbilder,” 118. – From Amos 9:1, ancient Christian tradition generally refers not to Gen 28:12 but to Ezekiel (Theodoret, *In Am.*, PG 81:1704a). The altar mentioned in Amos 9:1 is located in Jerusalem, not in Bethel (Theodore of Mopsuestia, *In Am.*, PG 66:297a, without reference to Ezekiel).

Israel's plight: "Had you believed and gone up, you would never have had to go down again. But now, since you did not believe and did not ascend, your sons are enslaved in four kingdoms of this world...."⁵⁹ In PRE 35 this is pointed out even more clearly: the princes are the princes of Babylon, Media, Greece and Edom (Rome).⁶⁰ Concerning the latter it is said:

"...and He showed him the prince of the kingdom of Edom ascending, and he was not descending, but was saying, 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High'" (Isa 14:14).

We should bear in mind that Isa 14:13f. is usually interpreted by reference to the motif of Satan's claim before his fall.

Jacob thus sees the rise of the enemies of the God of Israel. In this interpretation, one can see fears for the survival of Israel, fears which are met by a comforting word from God. In the time of Christian dominance such fears were unfortunately quite topical in view of the exclusion and marginalization the Jewish community suffered. The fact that "Edom" stands for Rome is already encountered in earlier tradition, there referring to pre-Christian Rome, but it also encountered later, in "Christian" times.

In Christian tradition, as far as I know, a negative identification of those ascending to heaven is completely absent. Implicitly or explicitly with reference to Col 3:1,⁶¹ Christian theologians summarily paraphrase the ascent as progress in piety⁶² and asceticism,⁶³ occasionally also as progress in the understanding of the Holy Scriptures.⁶⁴ Even where the cross of Christ is seen as the "ladder," the ethical dimension is present.⁶⁵ This is not surprising given the early church reception of Gal 2:19f.; 5:24.⁶⁶ In martyr literature, however, there is hardly any reference to Gen 28.⁶⁷

The descent makes some theologians think of the failure of humankind,⁶⁸ or of the devil's fall.⁶⁹ Jerome additionally interprets the ascent and descent to certain people: Paul ascended whereas Judas Iscariot descend-

⁵⁹ STEMBERGER, "Patriarchenbilder," 117.

⁶⁰ PRE 35, Friedlander, 265. For details see STEMBERGER, "Patriarchenbilder," 117.

⁶¹ Zeno of Verona, *Tract.* 1:37,4/12, CCSL 22:104.

⁶² Jerome, *Ep.* 68.2, CSEL 54:529 (referring on Matt 19:21); Zeno of Verona, *Tract.* 1:37,1/1, CCSL 22:101; Augustine, *En. Ps.* 119,2, CCSL 40:1777f.

⁶³ Jerome, *Ep.* 3.4, CSEL 54:15; *vita sancti Desiderii* 55, CCSL 117:400; Benedict of Nursia, *Reg.* 7.5–7, CSEL 75:40f.; *Regula Magistri*, SC 105 :420.

⁶⁴ Cassiodorus, *Inst.* 1 praef 2, FC 39/1:94–96.

⁶⁵ Chromatius, *Serm.* 1,6, CCSL 9 A:5.

⁶⁶ MEISER, *Galater*, 111f.114–116.282–285.

⁶⁷ See VON DÖRNBERG, *Traum*, 86f.; 208f.

⁶⁸ Tertullian, *Adv. Marc* 3:24.9, CCSL 1:543; id., *Fug.* 1.4, CCSL 2:1136; Arnobius minor, *In Ps.* 125, CCSL 25:209; Zeno of Verona, *Tract.* 1:37,4/12, CCSL 22:103f., referring on Lk 9,62; 17,32; Benedict of Nursia, *Reg.* 7.7, CSEL 75:41.

⁶⁹ Jerome, *Tract. Ps.* 119, CCSL 78:248.

ed.⁷⁰ However, it is objected that there is a difference between “descending” and “falling.”⁷¹ Thus, the descent can finally signify the behavior of taking care of the weak, as Paul had exemplified.⁷² Maximus Confessor sees the interaction of virtue and progress in knowledge symbolized: the ascending angels are the *logoi* of virtue, elevated by us, the descending angels are the *logoi* of knowledge, descending because of our elevation of virtue.⁷³ Jacob of Edessa understands the dream as a prophetic vision of Jesus who descended from heaven so that through his descent humankind would be able to ascend to heaven.⁷⁴

The allegorization of the ladder to progress or regress in matters of spiritual perfection, also encountered in medieval art, has experienced an unexpected revitalization in modern Judaism. During the 1990s, the Jerusalem weekly *Kol Ha'ir* included a column entitled “Sulam Ya'aqov” (cf. Gen 28:12), in which the author Ya'aqov Levy subjected Jerusalem's synagogues and *minyanim* each to a critique after a visit, concluding by rating them - not unlike a restaurant critic - on his ‘Jacob scale.’

2.7. *God's Presence (Gen 28:13)*

Exegetical Jewish and Christian tradition must try to avoid contradiction with Exod 33:23.

In Jub 27:21 it is God himself of whom Jacob dreams (there is no mention of a vision of God by the patriarch!); Josephus (*Ant.* 1:279) explicitly speaks of the vision of God. In YalkMJes 49:3, Gen 28:13 is understood as a protective measure of God for the benefit of Jacob, who is endangered by the angels. One may ask if the angels are here understood as demons as in MHG Gen 28:13; YalkGen 119.⁷⁵ In GenR 68:12 reference is made to Amos 9:1 as a parallel.⁷⁶ In the Targum Onqelos, however, the motif of “glory” is inserted in order to avoid the idea of a direct vision of God.⁷⁷ In

⁷⁰ Jerome, *Tract. Ps.* 119, CCSL 78:248.

⁷¹ Augustine, *En. Ps.* 119.2, CCSL 40:1778; idem., *Tract. Ev. Io.* 7.23, CCSL 36:81; Zeno, *Tract.* 1:37,4/11, CCSL 22:103.

⁷² Augustine, *En. Ps.* 119.2, CCSL 40:1778f., concerning Paul; Ps.-Bede, *Qu. Gen.*, PL 93:333d.

⁷³ Maximus Confessor, *Qu.* 88, CCSG 10:68.

⁷⁴ GRYPEOU/SPURLING, *Book of Genesis*, 308. According to Severianus of Gabala, Jesus “will be a ladder for those lying down because of sin und because of Adam's transgression and he will lead us up to heaven, being a magnificent and heavenly gate, revealing to us the Father himself and the Holy Ghost, through the ladder which connects the heavenly with the earthly things” (*Hom. Cath.* 1.5–6, ET GRYPEOU/SPURLING, *Book of Genesis*, 308).

⁷⁵ THOMA/ERNST, *Gleichnisse*, 64, 121.

⁷⁶ GenR 68:12, Neusner, 12.

⁷⁷ TgOnQ Gen 28:13, Grossfeld, 104.

the painting at the *Via Latina*, God is not represented. This corresponds to Jewish reservations about such a representation.⁷⁸

Is the problem of God's visibility in the sense of Exod 33:18–23 or John 1:18a reflected in ancient Christian commentaries on Gen 28? Some authors do not answer the question.⁷⁹ In others the question does not arise because they presuppose that Jacob did not see God the Father but Jesus Christ. The motif serves Justin's claim that the Old Testament already contains references to the Logos, whom Justin identifies as Jesus,⁸⁰ and is thus part of the strategy of appropriating the Old Testament for belief in Jesus as the Messiah. In Irenaeus, however, this motif can be asserted under the impression of Exod 33:23, but also in anti-Marcionite and anti-gnostic positions in favor of the unity of the God of both testaments.⁸¹

Didymus of Alexandria concludes from John 3:13 that the angels mentioned in Gen 28:12 did not ascend to the very highest heaven.⁸² Rabanus Maurus, in treating Exod 33:18–23, comments on the seeming contradiction between John 1:18a and the vision of God by the patriarchs of the Old Testament as follows: *et videri (scil. Deus) potuit per quasdam circumscriptas imagines, et videri non potest per incircumscriptionem lumen aeternitatis*.⁸³

The common Christian identification of the one appearing at the top of the ladder with Christ poses special exegetical problems to Caesarius of Arles. How can the sleeping Jacob represent Christ, when the Lord at the top of the ladder also represents Christ? First, Caesarius answers by referring to Acts 9:4, where the exalted Christ asks the persecutor Paul "Why are you persecuting me?" and not "Why are you persecuting the Church?"⁸⁴ The ladder Jacob dreams of is the cross, and it makes sense that Jacob wins his bride only after the dream of the ladder: Christ won the church only after his death.⁸⁵ Again Caesarius asks how at the same time the sleeping Jacob and the Lord at the top of the ladder can represent Christ. John 1:51 gives the answer: if the angels descended on the Son of God because he was on earth, in what way did the angels ascend to the Son

⁷⁸ STEMBERGER, "Patriarchenbilder," 117, referring to bChul 91b.

⁷⁹ John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 54.3, PG 54:475–477; Rabanus Maurus, *In Gen.*, PL 107:591b–594b, but cf. his commentary on Exodus (see below).

⁸⁰ Justin, *Dial.* 58.11, BOBICHON I, 340.

⁸¹ Irenaeus, *Dem.* 45, FC 8/1:64; *Adv. Haer.* 4:10,1, FC 8/4:76. Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3:24.10, CCSL 1:543; Walafrid Strabo, *Gloss.*, PL 113:154cd are also convinced that Jacob saw Jesus.

⁸² Didymus, *Frgm. Joh* 1, TU 89:177.

⁸³ Rabanus Maurus, *In Ex.* 4:19, PL 108:231a.

⁸⁴ Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 87.2, CCSL 103:358.

⁸⁵ Caesarius of Arles, *Serm.* 87.3, CCSL 103:358.

of Man if not because he is in heaven? Thus, Gen 28 and John 1:51 prove the doctrine of the two natures in Jesus Christ.⁸⁶

The possibility offered by Gen 31:11, 13 is taken up surprisingly rarely to help explain Gen 28:13, in which an angel is addressed at the anointing of the cult stone. The unidentifiable author recorded in Procopius of Gaza at the same time establishes a reference to Exod 3:2, 4 in order to draw a parallel between these epiphanies.⁸⁷

2.8. *The Speech of God (Gen 28:13–15)*

The character of the promise occasionally also determines the interpretation of the phrase “the land on which you lie”: God rolled up all the land of Israel and placed it under Jacob so that his descendants could conquer it with ease.⁸⁸ In Christian tradition, I have not yet become aware of a parallel to this exegesis.

According to the account of Josephus, which at this point goes beyond the biblical models, Jacob is promised *εὐδαιμονία* and wealth. This is probably directed against the ancient anti-Jewish assessment of Judaism as a nation of beggars, as expressed several times in Roman literature.⁸⁹ The Targum Jonathan on Genesis provides the speech of God with a justification of the promise of blessing:

And thy sons shall be as many as the dust of the earth and shall become strong on the west and on the east, on the north and on the south: and all the kindreds of the earth shall through thy righteousness and the righteousness of thy sons be blessed.

The background is probably that a divine blessing does not seem to be appropriate in view of the strange behavior of the patriarch after Gen 27. In the Targum Onqelos to Gen 28:15 the promise of assistance is referred to the accompaniment by the Memra, in order to avoid direct contact with God.⁹⁰

In Christian tradition, the speech of God is sometimes understood as proof of education by the philanthropic God.⁹¹ The promise of descendants in Gen 28:14 can be related to Christ, and thus the salvation history of the

⁸⁶ Caesarius von Arles, *Serm.* 87.4, CCSL 103:358. Jn 3:13 is presupposed (Caesarius quoted it earlier) but also the v.l. *videbitis ... angelos Dei descendetes et ascendentes ad filium hominis* in Jn 1:51.

⁸⁷ Procopius of Gaza, *In Gen.*, GCS NF 22:342.

⁸⁸ bChul 91b.

⁸⁹ FELDMAN, “Josephus’ Portrait of Jacob,” 108f., referring on Martial, *Ep.* 12:57,1–14; Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.10–16, 256; 6.542–547.

⁹⁰ Targum Onqelos Gen 28:15, Grossfeld, 104.

⁹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1:56,4, GCS 12:123.

Old Testament can be appropriated for Christianity.⁹² The promise of assistance refers to Christ's promise of assistance in Matt 28:20.⁹³

2.9. *Jacob's Answer (Gen 28:16f.)*

The conclusion of Gen 28:17 (“Here is nothing but the gate of heaven”) is applied to Jerusalem in PRE 35:⁹⁴

Hence thou canst learn that everyone who prays in Jerusalem – is (reckoned) as though he had prayed before the Throne of Glory, for the gate of heaven is there, and it is open to hear the prayers of Israel, as it is said, ‘And this is the gate of heaven’.

The text was written at a time when the temple no longer stood. The designation of Jerusalem as the “gate of heaven” and the reference to its being open to the prayers of Israel provide an example of how memory gives rise to strength for common survival. PRE 35 further reports that God sank the stone into the center of the earth so that it could now be considered the navel of the world.⁹⁵ This idea can also be perceived as legitimation and consolation in times of suffering.

In Christian tradition we also find the interpretation referring to the future tabernacle that the Lord had established among the Israelites.⁹⁶ Another explanation, based on John 10:9, understands the “gate” as Jesus Christ.⁹⁷

2.10. *The Anointing of the Stone (Gen 28:18)*

Jacob erects the stone in memory of this vision.⁹⁸ According to Apponius, the anointing points to the pouring of the anointing oil of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁹ Theodoret interprets this anointing merely as a sign of piety.¹⁰⁰ Eustathius of Antioch understands the pouring of oil as an allusion to Mary Magdalene's pouring sweet oil on Jesus's feet (John 12:3–7). Bethel, house of God, is a symbol for the temple, i.e. the body of Jesus (cf. John 2:21).¹⁰¹

⁹² Justin, *Dial.* 120.1, Bobichon I, 504.

⁹³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaph. Gen.* 4, PG 69:189a, also in Procopius of Gaza, *In Gen.*, GCS 22:341.

⁹⁴ PRE 35, Friedlander, 267.

⁹⁵ PRE 35, Friedlander, 266. Corresponding ideas are already attested earlier in ancient Judaism; cf. TILLY, *Jerusalem*, passim.

⁹⁶ Augustine, *Qu. Gen.* 83, CCSL 33:32. Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Frqm. Gen.*, PG 66:644a–b, reveals the exegetical basis Exod 40:9, 16.

⁹⁷ Aphrahat, *De oratione* 5 (SHERIDAN, *Genesis 12–50*, 188).

⁹⁸ Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica* Gen. 73, PL 198:1115a.

⁹⁹ Apponius, *Cant.* 12:56, CCSL 19:292–293.

¹⁰⁰ Theodoret, *Qu. Gen.* 85, OECT:168, referring to practice also of his own days.

¹⁰¹ Eustathius of Antioch, in *Collectio Coislana in Genesim*, CCSG 15:226; cf. GRYPEOU/SPURLING, *Book of Genesis*, 313–314.

Augustine had another possible misunderstanding in mind: when Jacob poured oil on the stone, it was in no way similar to idolatry, rather neither then nor later did he seek out the stone for worship or sacrifice, but in the clearest prophecy a sign was set that refers to the anointing; after all, the name “Christ” comes from “anointed.”¹⁰²

2.11. *The Renaming of the City (Gen 28:19)*

Jerome refers with amusement to the opinion of some exegetes that before the renaming the city was called אולם (he translates it as “before”)¹⁰³ but does not mention the meaning of אולם (porch of the temple) attested in 1Reg 6. Occasionally the tension between *locus* v. 11 and *urbs* v. 19 is perceived, for example by Peter Comestor: v. 19 is the *urbs proxima*.¹⁰⁴

2.12 *Jacob’s Vow (Gen 28:20–22)*

In Jewish tradition, the final לאמר in Gen 28:20 raises the question of its meaning. GenR finds it in the instruction to Jacob suggesting a vow to future generations in times of need. The fact that Jacob was the first to make a vow is also noted; this fits Ps 132:2, where , the God of Jacob and not the God of Abraham or Isaac,¹⁰⁵ as well as 1Chron 29:10 (“God of Israel” refers to Jacob).¹⁰⁶ The words “if God is with me” must be counterbalanced with the divine promise Gen 28:13–15 and are interpreted as follows: “if all of the conditions that he has stipulated with me are carried out.”¹⁰⁷

Augustine wants to clear up a possible misunderstanding. The words “And this stone shall be the house of God” do not mean that he calls the stone God, but that the future house of God will be in this place.¹⁰⁸

The promise to tithe is referred to in passing in Josephus (*Ant.* 1.284) and in Jub 27:21, without any halakhic consequences being derived from it

¹⁰² Augustine, *Quaest. Gen.* 84, CCSL 33:32; similarly *En. Ps.* 44.20, CCSL 38:508. In *En. Ps.* 44.19 CCSL 38:507 he brings an additional argument: anointing of kings and priests only occurred in the kingdom where Christ was foretold and anointed, and where the name “Christ” comes from. The argument is based on Ps 44[45]:8 (*dilexisti iustitiam et odisti iniquitatem; propterea unxit te, Deus, Deus tuus*). The first is interpreted as vocative and is referred to Jesus Christ as the addressee of the anointing.

¹⁰³ Jerome, *Hebr. qu. in Gen.*, CCSL 72:34.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica* Gen. 73, PL 198:1115a. Also the name *Luza* is not the first name of this city, rather it used to be called *Jebus*, because of the Jebusites. The name *amygdalus* competes with the name *Luza* because the root *amygdalina* was found there and the area is very rich in trees of this species.

¹⁰⁵ GenR 70:1, Neusner, 25.

¹⁰⁶ GenR 70:2, Neusner, 26.

¹⁰⁷ GenR 70:4, Neusner, 27.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, *Qu.* Gen. 85, CCSL 33:32. Whether Augustine read “me” cannot be decided on the basis of the paraphrastic peculiarity of his text.

at this point. This is different in Jub 28:6f., where it is inferred from Gen 29:26 that one may not marry the younger daughter before the older one. In the very fragmentary text 1Q21 Frgm. 4.1 and in 4Q213 Frgm. 3.4, the tithing by Jacob is presupposed as fact. For some Christian authors, Jacob's vow points to the fact that the future house of God would be located here.¹⁰⁹

3. Conclusion

The comparison between ancient Jewish and Christian interpretations shows occasionally analogous interpretations, but then also differences. First, let us identify the analogies.

1. The purpose of the identification of the location (e.g., the place of Jacob's vision as the Temple Mount or Golgotha) is to emphasize the coherence of one's own religious system and to suggest trust in the reliability of the Holy Scriptures and in the God described in them.

2. The question as to what extent – if at all – Jacob was worthy of the promise of blessing or the dream revelation shows that in both religions Jacob's behavior is considered morally objectionable and has problematic consequences with regard to the concept of God. Jewish as well as Christian authors perceived the moral ambiguities in the life of the third patriarch.

3. The understanding of the “angels” as contemporary opposing powers or pious figures (or sinners) and the allegorical interpretation of the ascent and descent diverge in content (for this see below) but show an analogous concern for contemporary relevance: Jacob's dream cannot be merely an event in his life, otherwise later readers, both Jewish and Christian, would have no benefit of it.¹¹⁰

The differences are most evident in the Israel-related interpretation on the one hand and the Christological interpretation on the other. Some of the divergence between the Jewish and Christian receptions of Gen 28:10–22 are due to the fact that the identification of Jacob and Israel directly concerns Israel's lifeblood.

1. The identification of the ascending and descending angels with certain people and powers has different functions in Jewish tradition, depending on whether figures such as Moses and Aaron or enemies of Israel are envisaged: in the first case it is meant to represent a connection to God, in the second it is meant to represent the risk to Israel. In Christian tradition,

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *Qu. Gen.* 85, CCSL 33:32.

¹¹⁰ For this criterion, see Ambrose, *In Luc.* 3 :28, CCSL 14:91; Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. in Cant.*, prol., GNO 6:5f.

on the other hand, the idea that the figures rising up could also be negative figures is not considered.

2. Only in Jewish tradition is a connection made between Gen 28:12 and Ezek 1. Again, the idea that Israel is connected to God is emphasized. Christian allegorical interpretations towards Christ can be employed for various purposes, but frequently are anti-Jewish in a regrettable way.¹¹¹

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¹¹¹ I warmly thank J. Andrew Doole for improving my English.

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