

## JOHN 1:51 AND GENESIS 28<sup>1</sup>

Since the time of Augustine, exegetes have seen a connection between vs. 51 and Gen xxviii 12, where in a dream Jacob sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven, ". . . and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it." Michaelis has called into question this connection between John and Genesis, but it seems convincing on the basis of the clear mention of angels ascending and descending, especially if we recall the previous reference to Jacob - Israel in the Nathanael scene. Yet, even if Genesis supplies the imagery for the Johannine saying about the Son of Man, what is the interpretation of the saying? Are the disciples who will help to form the new Israel, and of whom Nathanael is an example, promised a spiritual insight comparable to Jacob's vision? When scholars try to be more precise, their different answers are ingenious. We must sample a few of the more important.

It will be noted that in vs. 51 the angels are ascending and descending on the Son of Man, while Genesis mentions ascending and descending "on it," presumably the ladder. However, a few rabbis read "on him," that is, on Jacob (*Midrash Rabbah*). Some scholars think that the latter reading lies behind John's form of the saying. This would make the Son of Man (a collective figure in Dan vii) a replacement for Jacob (= Israel, and to some extent a collective figure). The whole theory is dubious. It is possible but not certain that the Son of Man in John is a collective figure; xii 32 - 34 distinguishes between the Son of Man and all those who believe in him. Secondly, it is Nathanael in John who is the equivalent of Israel, not Jesus, the Son of Man.

Another variant on the Jacob story is also brought into the discussion. In the *Midrash Rabbah* on Gen xxviii 12, we find that Jacob's true appearance is in heaven while his body lies on the earth, and the angels are traveling back and forth between them. Applying this to John, some suggest that Jesus is really with the Father as Son of Man, and yet he is on earth at the same time; the angels constitute the communication between the heavenly and earthly Jesus. A more plausible variation would be that Jesus himself is the connection between heavenly reality and the earth. With variations, a theory like this is proposed by Odeberg, Bultmann, Lightfoot and others. It should be pointed out that the rabbinic source for the theory is no earlier than the 3rd century A. D., although the interpretation of Genesis may be earlier.

In still another variation, the Targums (Aramaic translations) have God's *shekinah* on the ladder. Justin Martyr's "Dialogue of Trypho" reflects the early Christian belief that Christ was on the ladder. Thus, in having the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man instead of on the ladder, John may be continuing the theme of the Prologue that Jesus is the localization of the *shekinah*. Quispel carries this suggestion further by associating vs. 51 with the *merkabah* mystique in Judaism, based on speculation about the divine chariot seen by Ezekiel. Quispel thinks of angels ascending to the Son of Man in heaven above and descending to Nathanael below (even though John says descending upon the Son of Man). Another variation concentrates on the place where Jacob had his vision, namely, Bethel, the "house of God . . . gate of heaven." The idea is that, since the angels ascend and descend upon the Son of Man, Jesus is taking the place of Bethel as the house of God - an instance of the Prologue's theme of Jesus as the Tabernacle and the Gospel's theme of Jesus as the Temple. This interpretation is defended in detail by Fritsch. Jeremias stresses the rock at Bethel on which Jacob slept and which became a ceremonial pillar there (Gen xxviii 18). In

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Gospel of John 1-12: Introduction, translation and notes* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 89-91

Jewish literature, which Jeremias cites, a mystique grew up about this rock as the first stone created by God and the one which He spread out to form the world. The application to John would be that in vs. 51 Jesus has replaced the rock of Bethel, and this would be an instance of the theme of Jesus the rock who makes Simon the rock (i 41 - 42).

No one of these variations is particularly convincing. However, in the theme that they have in common they are probably correct; whether it is as the ladder, the *shekinah*, the *merkabah*, Bethel, or the rock, the vision means that Jesus as Son of Man has become the locus of divine glory, the point of contact between heaven and earth. The disciples are promised figuratively that they will come to see this; and indeed, at Cana they do see his glory.