

Brothers and Sisters

Thinking about what I could offer to the program of Biblical Papers, I remember my first assignment in Old Testament studies at St Vladimir's Seminary which was to pick a chapter of Genesis and analyze it according to the "documentary hypothesis", what part from the J document what part from E, D or P. I took the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel, which was a fairly simple section to analyze in those terms (Genesis 28:10-19)

No doubt I chose it for a certain attraction to the dream, and to the ladder connecting earth and heaven with the Angelicals ascending and descending. Why not take this section and try to say something further?

I will also not be approaching it this time as a problem of textual analysis, in which I am certainly unqualified to say anything new, and also I will not be approaching it from the point of view of the Patristic commentaries, which on this passage are not very developed.

*At the end a summary of some early commentaries.

Well we accept both the academic and the theological, but perhaps we may make also a simple meditation on who is the dreamer at Bethel and what is the dream?

(1)THE DREAMER

The dreamer Jacob is a man on the road at night, leaving his home having won a birthright by trickery from his father and elder brother and fearing retribution from his brother when his father dies, a subtle man, loved by his mother, (the single word description of Jacob in Genesis 25:28 means something like 'mild' 'reserved'). I think the word Homer uses for Odysseus 'crafty' or 'sly' would be appropriate. Or 'subtle.' Like Odysseus he is a crafty man now seeking an unknown future, as Odysseus did by sea.

The character Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce's "Portrait of the artist as a young man" sees his destiny as ruled by "Silence. Exile. Cunning."

Such men are, in the old stories, loved by the gods--so Hermes is a cheat and a thief of cattle and an outsider but Zeus includes him among the twelve gods of Olympus, and Loki is not really a god and is a trickster always but Odin Allfather loves him together with his natural son Thor.

Is it not the mystery of the story of the Prodigal Son and of the understandable incomprehension of the older son, at the special love of the father for the son who went down into the darkness and returned?

In identifying Jacob with the figure of "The Trickster" (to use a terminology of analytic psychology) we realize that the Trickster in himself an expression of disorder and yet, as C G Jung says, when a crisis comes "out of disaster the longing for a Savior

can arise" and "the individual shadow contains within itself the seed of a conversion into its opposite."

In the middle of his way and alone between past and future Jacob lies down on the earth with a large stone placed at his head. Not as a pillow, but as a sort of protection perhaps.

It is a humble position, lying on the earth.

The Zohar speaks of it as the union of Jacob with the Shekinah, with the earth, with God's presence within the earth...

The Irish poet Yeats uses this moment of lying down by Jacob in speaking of his own sense of having come to an end of his creative possibilities,

"I must lie down where all the ladders start,
in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."

(2)THE DREAM

The Dream which comes to Jacob is of a ladder, or perhaps the original image is more of a spiral stairway, like that of a ziggurat, joining below and above, earth and heaven.

And on this stairway is a circulation of life, the Angels ascending and descending. It is like an image of the circulation of the arterial and venous blood of the universe and Jesus in John 1:51 says indeed that the ladder is "The Son of Man". Is he himself, and is the true ideal humanity uniting earth and heaven, upper and lower in a perfect circulation.

Now a stairway has levels and grades and the tradition of Jewish interpretation expressed in the Zohar sees levels of experience from the purely material to the scientific and artistic and philosophical and into the Divine life itself, and this is expressed in a wonderful painting of Jacob's dream by the visionary artist William Blake...Well but the full humanity is aware at every level from the heavenly to the earthly and there is not the fragmentary consciousness we see in the world around us now.

Then there is the voice of God within the dream telling Jacob the promise that the descendants of this wanderer will be as many as the dust of the earth and through them will come blessing. There is a theological aspect to the promise of course but beyond that, as received by Jacob, there is the awareness of his secure place in the flow of God's plan from the past to the furthest future, in the evolution of the worlds (not in the limited scientific sense) but as the deep disclosure of God's purpose.

(3)DREAMER AND DREAM

"Silence,exile, cunning" is the way of the man on the road like Jacob... In some measure it is the way of all who are able to change. To them, when they "lie down where all the ladders start" is given the vision of the full humanity, perfect in the Son of Man, but imaged in all human life. The circulation of Above and Below ,of Past and Future ,as the voice over the ladder establishes Jacob's place within Time... Jacob is "The Trickster" come in humility to a decisive point, the vision is Hermes Emerald Tablet("that which is above is like to that which is below")which so captured the imagination of the Renaissance that Hermes is pictured alongside Moses on the pavement at Sienna. But to this is added the dimensions of circulation and Time... In Jacob and the Ladder we see set in motion the static platonic or neoplatonic image, and we find the redemption of the wanderer and outsider and trickster, beloved by God as was the Prodigal by the Father.

In history we may say that there are often the pairs, the possessor and the non possessor, the prophet and the priest, the learned and the holy fool and so on... As Fr Men said there is Zosima and there is Ferapoint. For each there is a place, for Esau as well as Jacob, for the First Son as well as for the Prodigal... But it seems God gives dreams like that of the Ladder to those who have wandered in poverty and who lie down in humility... "where all the ladders start."
The Spirit speaks to all the churches, but maybe most fully to the Church in pilgrimage...

This then shared with you on Jacob's dream and to each of us who are pilgrims God gives this dream...

"Dreams pervade the world" said Moses de Leon

and then he adds, for each of us also receives a personal dream
"the dream diverges into countless [dreams],corresponding to one's rung, he sees; corresponding to each person, his rung."

and the American singer Bob Dylan
"At times I think there are no words
But these[of dreams] to tell what's true
And there are no truths outside the Gates of Eden..."

+Seraphim Joseph Sigrist

*Early Church Commentaries. John 1:51 is the most interesting and important I think and we include it in the body of our text. Else the stone at Jacob's head is Christ(Jerome, Caesarius of Arles) Chrysostem misreading the stone as a pillow says it shows Jacob's hardiness and common sense. Aprahat says the ladder represents the Cross and Ambrose says it is a promise of the coming of Christ. Cyril of Alexandria says Christ is at the top of the ladder and Augustine says the ascending and descending angels are like the work of good preachers. Bede says the ladder is the Church. Chrysostem

notes that God's promise to Jacob shows his love and care and Jerome notes the higher ones ascent the greater ones fall. Liturgical texts also refer the ladder to the Virgin Mary.