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# In Search of an Elusive Jewish Core: The *Ladder of Jacob* Revisited

Once characterised by James Kugel as "one of the strangest texts to be included in recent collections of biblical pseudepigrapha", (Kugel, 1995, p. 209) the *Ladder of Jacob* has been an object of extensive research in the past few decades.[1] The result is a much better understanding of this composition's textual nature, history of transmission, and potential literary and cultural settings than was possible at the time when Kugel made his remark. A relatively short composition, the *Ladder* is useful in identifying broader issues that could be explored in connection with other Old Slavonic apocalypses, such as the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.[2] The present article takes its cue from recent scholarship on the *Ladder* as it seeks to reevaluate the significance of parallels between the composition's

[1] Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 4–11) offer the most recent summary of existing scholarship.

[2] On textual affinity between the Ladder and the Apocalypse of Abraham, see Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 35–36, 64–65, 89–90, n. 363).

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narrative and late antique Jewish traditions relating to Jacob's image engraved on the Throne of Glory. These parallels, the article argues, support a broader thesis about the Byzantine – that is, late antique and medieval – provenance of the *Ladder*, but they also point to the intellectually and linguistically complex scribal milieu from which our work is likely to have emerged.

The *Ladder* comes down to us within an anthology known as the *Explanatory Palaea* (Russ. Толковая палея, Bulg. Тълковна палея, etc.) and is presently not known outside the editorial framework of this anthology. *Explanatory Palaea* comprises expanded biblical narratives along with loosely connected excurses on the creation and natural phenomena. Anti-Jewish polemic is dispersed in editorial segments throughout the composition. At least three versions of this anthology have been identified: the *Explanatory Palaea*, and the *Chronographic Palaea* (Russ. Хронографическая палея) in its longer and shorter recensions. The *Palaea*'s earliest known manuscripts date to the third quarter of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century (see Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 12–23; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, pp. 199–200). The origins of the text and its history are a matter of debate, as is the exact relationship between the versions of the *Palaea*. The prevailing view, first formulated by Vasiliy Istrin, holds that the *Explanatory Palaea* is the earliest version, later reworked and expanded with the help of other sources to produce the two recensions of the *Chronographic Palaea*. This differentiation among various recensions, however, is likely a modern phenomenon. For medieval audiences, the polyform nature of a text would not be unusual, but it is something that modern textual criticism tries to rationalise by breaking up the text into a series of recensions. Without denying value to the recension-centred approach to the *Palaea*, it would be useful to complement it with the understanding of the *Palaea* as a fluid text circulating across a range of scribal adaptations (Истрин, 1905, pp. 135–203).[3]

The *Ladder*'s textual form is not stable either and varies across the *Palaea*'s recensions. Significantly, the version of the *Ladder* transmitted in the longer recension of the *Chronographic Palaea* includes a section known as the Prayer of Jacob (*LaddJac* 2:5–15), which is missing from the version of the *Ladder* in the *Explanatory Palaea*. A Hebrew version of the Prayer has been identified

[3] For a good introduction to the history of the Palaea's text, as well as a review of relevant scholarship, see Vodolazkin (2011, pp. 453–470), Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 12–23), and Грищенко and Турилов (2019, pp. 304–307).

by Reimund Leicht in an eleventh-century Cairo Genisa codex containing a collection of magico-mystical prayers.[4] The Old Slavonic and Hebrew versions of the Prayer are clearly related, although not identical. Neither of the two, argues Leicht, is textually superior or more authentic than the other. It is possible that both are translations from Greek and that the Prayer was originally composed in that language (Leicht, 1999, pp. 141–149, 151–152, 168–173; cf. Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 88–90).

Leicht's observations about the textual nature of the Prayer may have broader implications for the textual history of the *Ladder* in general. The editors of the *Explanatory* and *Chronographic* versions of the *Palaea*, argues Istrin, had access to the same original *Ladder*, which they used independently of one another. Each editor utilised the original in accordance with his own tastes and agenda, hence the important textual differences between the two recensions. The recension in the *Chronographic Palaea* stays closer to the original, even though the *Explanatory Palaea*'s recension is chronologically earlier (just like the anthology as a whole). The fundamentals of Istrin's reconstruction have been accepted and further developed by later authors, most recently Sabine Fahl, Christfried Böttrich, and Dieter Fahl.[5]

While broadly agreeing with this line of argument, I propose that we shift our attention away from attempting to reconstruct the *Ladder*'s lost Vorlage to appreciating the text as the sum of its simultaneously circulating manuscript versions. As Pennington notes in the preface to the translation of the *Ladder*, "in a situation like this such terms as 'original' and 'interpolation' tend to lose their meaning. In both recensions, it seems, we are dealing with a document in an almost permanent state of literary flux" (Pennington, 1984, p. 454). By the 15th century, the *Ladder* existed as a range of its manuscript versions rather than a well-delineated literary unit traceable to a clearly defined prototype. Such fluidity on the compositional level of the *Ladder* is similar in nature to the circulation of one of the *Ladder*'s components, the Prayer or Jacob, across a range of textual adaptations. Like the surviving Hebrew and Slavonic versions of the Prayer, discussed by Leicht, the *Ladder*'s two recensions belong among scribal adaptations which together constitute the *Ladder*'s text with its characteristically

[4] See Leicht (1999, pp. 140–176). For a recent review of Leicht's argument, see Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 34–36, 86–87).

[5] See Истрин (1902, pp. 419–420; 1905, pp. 150–151). Istrin's conclusions become a starting point for Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 23–30).

unstable boundaries. Such a text equals the total of its versions produced in scribal workshops and manuscript recensions in circulation at any given time.[6]

## Jacob's Dream

The *Ladder*'s opening section is relatively uniform across the *Palaea*'s manuscripts (*LaddJac* 1:1–12): it is a paraphrase of the biblical story of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28:10–22. According to the story, as he is making his way from Beersheba to Harran, fleeing from his brother Esau, Jacob stops overnight at a place that he would later call Bethel. There Jacob has a dream in which he sees "a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. There above it stood the Lord" (Genesis 28:12–13). God talks to Jacob, promising him a multitude of descendants, protection, and the inheritance of the land from which Jacob is fleeing. When Jacob wakes up, he acknowledges the sanctity of the place by calling it "the house of God" (Bethel) and the "gate to heaven". The *Ladder* develops this story into a new narrative that departs significantly from the biblical original.

The *Ladder*'s opening section runs as follows:

> Поиде же убо Иаковь к Лавану, ую своему. И обрѣтъ мѣсто и успе ту, на камень възложивь главу; солнце бо зашло бѣаше. Туже и видѣ сонъ. <О лѣствицѣ>. И се лѣствица бяше утвержена на земли и досягши небеси – и бѣ верху лѣствици лице аки человѣче, изъ огня исѣчено, – имѣя же 12 степени до главы лѣствицины, и на коемьждо степени до верха лици человечи двѣ, одесную и ошуюю, 24 лица на лѣствицѣ до перси их. Среднее же лице превыше всѣх бяше, еже видѣх изъ огня до раму и до руку, излиха страшно паче онѣх 24–рии лиць. И еще мнѣ зрящю, и се ангели Божии въсхожахут и нисхожаху по неи, Господь же утвержашеся на неи.
>
> Jacob then went to Laban his uncle. He found a place and, laying his head on a stone, he slept there, for the sun had gone down. He had a dream. [About the ladder.] And behold, a ladder was fixed on the earth, whose top reached to heaven. And at the top of the ladder there was the face as of a man, carved out of fire. There were twelve steps leading to the top of the ladder, and on each step to the top there were two human faces, on the right and on the left, twenty-four faces down to their chests. And the face in the middle was higher than all that I saw, the one of fire, down to the shoulders

[6] See Badalanova Geller (2011, pp. 82–83) for similar observations on the editorial methods involved in the production of medieval Slavonic texts.

> and arms, exceedingly terrifying, more than those twenty-four faces. And while I was still looking at it, behold, angels of God ascended and descended on it. And the Lord was established on it. (*LaddJac* 1:1–5; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, pp. 202–203[7]; trans. Lunt, 1985, p. 407, with modifications)

At this point, Jacob's vision is interrupted by a commentary added by the *Palaea*'s Slavonic editors. While interesting in its own right, the commentary adds little to the understanding of the *Ladder*'s early layer and, therefore, can be omitted from the present discussion. That early layer containing the rest of the vision resumes several lines later:

> Богъ же стояшетъ и над лицемь горнимь. Оттолѣ възва ко мнѣ, глаголя: Иакове, Иакове! И рѣх: Се азъ. И рече ко мнѣ: Землю, на неиже ты спиши, тебѣ дамь ю и племени твоему по тобѣ. И умножю племя твое, яко звѣзды небесныя и яко пѣсок морьскыи. И благословятся сѣменемь твоим вся земля и живущии на неи в послѣдняя времена лѣт скончание. Благословение же мое, имже благослових тя, от тебе протечет в последнии род. Въсточнаа же и западнаа вся полна будуть племенемь твоим.
>
> And God was standing above the highest face, and he called to me from there, saying, "Jacob! Jacob!" And I said, "Here I am, Lord!" And he said to me, "The land on which you are sleeping, to you will I give it, and to your seed after you. And I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea. And through your seed all the earth and those living on it in the last times of the years of completion shall be blessed. My blessing with which I have blessed you shall flow from you unto the last generation; the East and the West all shall be full of your tribe". (*LaddJac* 1:6–12; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, pp. 203–204; trans. Lunt, 1985, p. 407, with modifications).

God's address to Jacob is an eschatological paraphrase of God's promise in Genesis 28:13–15. The paraphrase adds references to "those living in the last times of the years of completion" and "the last generation" but, otherwise, stays broadly faithful to the biblical text. The preceding vision, on the other hand, departs significantly from the story in Genesis 28:10–13 and, therefore, calls for special discussion.

As we look for this narrative's potential sources beyond the Bible, it has been argued that, like the Prayer of Jacob, the vision in *LaddJac* 1:1–12 may offer another example of parallels between the *Ladder* and earlier Jewish traditions, in this case those associated with Jacob's image engraved on the Throne of

[7] Here and throughout, chapter and verse references to the Ladder of Jacob follow this edition; see the appendix for the earlier editions of the Ladder that were consulted during work on this article.

Glory. In what follows, I shall analyse the vision as a rhetorical unit governed by a set of structural norms and formulas. I will then compare these norms to the structuring principles that govern the composition of late antique and early medieval Jewish texts on Jacob's engraved image. I will draw broader conclusions about the *Ladder*'s potential date and textual history based on the results of this analysis.

## The Image of Jacob

First explored in detail by Kugel, the potential parallels between Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* and Jewish traditions relating to Jacob's image engraved on the Throne of Glory received further attention in the works of Jarl E. Fossum and Andrei A. Orlov (see Fossum, 1995, pp. 143, n. 30, 147–149; Kugel, 1994, pp. 117–119; Orlov, 2006, pp. 257–278). The motif of Jacob's engraved image is widespread in late antique and early medieval Jewish literature, spanning a range of genres from biblical commentaries, known as *midrashim*, to Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible (*targumim*) and liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*). Targum Neofiti, an interpretive translation of the Pentateuch into Aramaic, composed in late antique Palestine, offers a good summary of the motif:

> And behold, the angels that had accompanied [Jacob] from the house of his father ascended to announce good news to the angels on high, saying: "Come and see the pious man whose image is set in the Throne of Glory [לגברא חסידא דאיקונין דידיה קביעא בכורסיה איקרא], whom you desired to see". And behold, the angels from before the Lord were ascending and descending and observed him. (Targum Neofiti to Genesis 28:12; Díez Macho, 1968, vol. 1, p. 179; trans. McNamara, 1992, p. 140, with modifications)[8]

In its broad outline, the motif interprets Jacob's dream at Bethel as a vision of a ladder stretching from the earth to God's throne in heaven. The throne features the image of Jacob, a heavenly counterpart to the real-life Jacob sleeping at Bethel. Angels who ascend and descend on the ladder observe both the image and the sleeping patriarch's figure in a scene that programmatically

[8] The same tradition appears in most manuscripts of the Fragmentary Targum, including, with important variations, MS Vatican. See Klein (1980, vol. 1, pp. 57, 144 (MS Vatican)). For a helpful review of textual variants, see Fossum (1995, pp. 138–142).

blurs the distinction between the two. Kugel interprets the *Ladder*'s "face as of a man, carved out of fire" as a variation on the same theme. Fossum and Orlov expand on this observation by exploring related motifs in rabbinic, Christian, and Second Temple Jewish literature.

More recently, Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl have called in question the heuristic value of the parallel between traditions related to Jacob's image engraved on the throne and the description of Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* by emphasising the fundamental difference in content between Jacob's image motif and the vision. In the latter, contrary to the tradition of Jacob's image engraved on the throne, it is not angels but rather Jacob himself who sees the fiery face at the top of the ladder. Whereas rabbinic tradition situates Jacob's image on God's throne, the face described in the *Ladder* is placed on or right above the ladder. Therefore, the face belongs not in God's heavenly court, where it would share in divine glory, but among other busts on the ladder, later interpreted to symbolise a sequence of nations that oppress Israel. The topmost face is the culmination of this oppression, hence the sense of dread associated with it in the vision. There is no evidence here for contact between the *Ladder* and rabbinic tradition. "The 'fiery face' on or above the ladder", Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl conclude, "certainly does not belong to the tradition regarding Jacob's heavenly counterpart" (Fahl et al., 2015, p. 64, and, more broadly, Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 10, n. 68, 62–64).[9]

Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl's observations about differences in content between Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* and Jewish lore on Jacob's engraved image are convincing. In contrast to the argument made by Kugel, Fossum, and Orlov, a simple progression from the lore on Jacob's image to Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* now seems problematic. At the same time, unlike Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl, I am not prepared to simply dismiss traditions related to Jacob's image as a potential source for the *Ladder*'s narrative. Instead of focusing on differences in content, I would like to explore what Badalanova Geller describes as "a certain continuum of parallel narrative structures appearing in quite specific patterns of context" – that is, a type of formulaic scene that allows for the creation of new content through the reassembly of the scene's structural elements (see Badalanova Geller, 2011, p. 42, n. 133).

[9] Böttrich (2014, p. 297) is more cautious in his assessment of the relationship between the Ladder and traditions on Jacob's heavenly image: "The whole idea is very complex and puzzling here. Perhaps it was already unintelligible for the Slavonic translators or redactors". I will come back to this line of argument shortly.

## A Structuring Scene: The Image Motif Reinvented

The opening vision in *LaddJac* 1:1–13 and the interpretation of this vision in *LaddJac* 4:1–36 likely belong to different editorial stages in the development of the text. Most scholars today fold the vision and its interpretation into a single editorial unit, although Kugel also argues that the interpretation consists of at least two chronological layers that he dates to before and after the capture of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE (Kugel, 1995, pp. 209–227). The inconsistency between the vision and the opening sentence of its interpretation, however, makes a simple continuity between the vision and the interpretation problematic. The interpretation begins with the vision's summary: "You have seen a ladder with twelve steps, each step having two human faces which change their appearance" (*LaddJac* 4:1; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, pp. 208–209; trans. Lunt, 1985, p. 409, with modifications).[10] The original vision, however, said nothing about the changing appearance of the human faces set on the steps of the ladder. This inconsistency does not automatically rule out the textual continuity between the vision and its interpretation, but it certainly complicates the transition from one to the other. The fact that the two are separated by large and editorially unstable bodies of intervening text makes the relationship between the vision and its interpretation even less certain.

It would be prudent, therefore, to approach the vision as a self-contained literary unit, a scene organised with the help of a toolkit of structuring formulas and compositionally distinct from the rest of the narrative, including the vision's interpretation in *LaddJac* 4:1–36. These structuring formulas, I argue, reflect the familiarity of the author(s) with earlier traditions concerning Jacob's image. At the same time, the author(s) of the *Ladder* were not the recipients of the living tradition, but rather the tradition's individual, often disjoined, elements and structural segments. Rather than operating within the tradition's inherent narrative, Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* reworks and reassembles these segments to generate a new narrative that is different in content yet structurally isomorphic with the lore on Jacob's image. This appropriation of structural elements from an earlier narrative combined with the break from the narrative's content helps shape the *Ladder*'s unique literary characteristics.

[10] The meaning of this phrase is ambiguous. See Fahl et al. (2015, p. 145).

The vision constitutes a scene centred on the twelve-step ladder stretching from the earth to heaven, the human face "carved out of fire" at the top of the ladder, and God standing above the face. On the right and left side of each step, there are two human faces or, more likely, busts, since they include chests (*litsi chelovechi dve, odesnuiu i oshuiuiu*, 24 *litsa na lestvitse do persi ikh* [лици человечи двѣ, одесную и ошуюю, 24 лица на лѣствицѣ до перси их]) (*LaddJac* 1:3; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, p. 202). The visage at the top of the ladder also includes shoulders and arms (*srednee zhe litse prevyshe vsekh biashe, ezhe videkh iz ognia do ramu i do ruku* [Среднее же лице превыше всѣх бяше, еже видѣх изъ огня до раму и до руку]), therefore it is best imagined as a fiery bust rather than a fiery face (*LaddJac* 1:4; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, p. 202). The vision's composition is structured around the central axis of the ladder with a bust portrait on the top and broadly corresponds to the composition associated with the motif of Jacob's image carved on the throne, as well as the late antique compositional matrix from which the throne motif likely originates. Once we focus on the scene's system of structural relationships – rather than on specific and often unstable meanings attached to individual elements within that system – the similarity between Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* and the motif of Jacob's image in late antique Jewish literature becomes evident. The two scenes operate within the parameters of the same matrix, even though the scene in the *Ladder* offers a series of new elements within the scenario and, therefore, takes possibilities contained in the matrix to a whole new level.[11]

The vision originates in a scribal milieu that negotiated rather well between Greek and Hebrew.[12] The same milieu was likely responsible for the Prayer of Jacob in its Greek and Hebrew iterations. It is almost certain that the *Ladder* was composed in Greek, and there is a good chance that, as argued by Leicht, the Prayer's original version was also Greek. Still, the vocabulary and syntax in both works fit Greek and Hebrew linguistic norms equally well. In what follows, I will explore several Slavonic terms that have significant semantic overlaps with Hebrew categories common in the lore on Jacob's image. This is

[11] On the role of the compositional matrix in the formation of the original tradition on Jacob's image, see Kaufmann (2006, pp. 45–53), with the emphasis on iconography, and, more broadly, Sivertsev (2022, pp. 45–62; 2024, pp. 107–147).

[12] Cf. Böttrich (2014, p. 299): "Somewhere in the Byzantine world there must have been a community or a circle reading and reworking Jewish apocalyptic as well as mystical texts, familiar with syncretistic magical traditions, but mainly settled in a Christian context", and, more broadly Böttrich (2014, pp. 298–300).

not to argue that the *Ladder*'s composers had access to Hebrew texts. It is likely, however, that they worked with a koine shaped by ongoing code-switching between Greek and Hebrew, a situation well illustrated by the vocabulary and syntax of the Prayer of Jacob (see Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 35–36, 88–90; Leicht, 1999, pp. 151–152, 168–173).

The scene centres on "the face as of a man, carved out of fire", that is, *litse aki chelověche, iz ognia isěcheno* [лице аки человѣче, изъ огня исѣчено] (*LadderJac* 1:2; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, p. 202; trans. Lunt, 1985, p. 407). This phrase stays relatively consistent throughout manuscript versions, with only minor variations that do not impact its overall meaning. The Old Slavonic *isěcheno* [исѣчено], "carved" or "engraved", provides a semantic equivalent to the Hebrew *haquq* [חקוק] used to describe Jacob's image "engraved" or "incised" in the Throne of Glory. Hebrew and Aramaic terminology associated with the manner of the image's execution is not entirely stable.[13] Targum Neofiti, quoted earlier, talks about "the pious man whose image [איקונין] is set [קביעא] in the Throne of Glory". So too, do other medieval and late antique Aramaic translations, such as *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and some manuscripts of the *Fragmentary Targum*. At one point, the sixth-century liturgical poet Yannai uses the root *hatam* [חתם] ("to seal") to describe God's act of engraving the image (Rabinovitz, 1985, vol. 1, p. 188, line 79). In the early seventh century, another poet, Eleazar berabbi Qillir, invokes "the form" [צורה] of Jacob "as drawn on the throne" [כרשום לכסא] (Elizur & Rand, 2014, p. 340, lines 457–458; my translation).

The most common way of describing the technique by which Jacob's image is made, however, was the term *haquq* ("engraved" or "incised"). This term is used by Rabbinic biblical commentaries (*midrashim*), Yannai (most of the time), and the mystical anthology known as *Hekhalot Rabbati*. A passage from the fifth-century biblical commentary (midrash) *Genesis Rabbah* illustrates this usage: "You [Jacob] are the one whose image [איקונין] is engraved on high [חקוקה למעלן]. [Angels] ascend and see his image; they descend and see him sleeping" (*Gen. Rab.* 68. 12; Theodor & Albeck, 1912–1936, vol. 2, p. 788; my translation).[14] Just as Jacob's *iqonin* in this passage is "engraved on high", so too is the *Ladder*'s "face as of a man" situated "at the top of the ladder" and

[13] For a helpful, if partial, review of sources, see Fossum (1995, pp. 135–142), and Bunta (2006, pp. 56–63).

[14] On the passage, see Sivertsev (2022, pp. 50–51; 2024, pp. 119–124, with literature). On Genesis Rabbah's provenance and textual history, see Strack and Stemberger (1996, pp. 276–283, with literature).

"carved out of fire". These two scenes are structurally isomorphic. The semantic field associated with the Old Slavonic *iščecheno* [исѣчено] broadly corresponds to the range of meanings associated with the Hebrew *haquq*. It is possible, therefore, that "the face as of a man, carved out of fire" develops within the matrix associated with Jacob's image.

One other aspect of the *Ladder*'s vision merits more detailed consideration: there is an inconsistency within the text regarding the exact nature of "the face as of a man, carved out of fire". On the one hand, the text refers to it as a *litse* [лице], that is, a "face", a term that does not imply the presence of other bodily parts beyond the countenance. On the other hand, as the vision develops, the faces turn into busts, both in the case of the face at the top of the ladder and the faces on the twelve steps of the ladder. The former is now described as "the face in the middle <…> the one of fire, down to the shoulders and arms" [Среднее же лице <…> изъ огня до раму и до руку], the latter are "twenty-four faces <…> down to their chests [24 лица <…> до перси их]" (LaddJac 1:3–4; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, p. 202; my translation, cf. Lunt, 1985, p. 407).

As noted by Horace Lunt, the Slavonic *litse* [лице] here likely translates the Greek *prosopon* [πρόσωπον], meaning "face" or "countenance", but it can also refer to "bust" or "portrait" (Lunt, 1985, p. 407, n. 1b).[15] According to Kugel, the Hebrew *iqonin* [איקונין], an adaptation of the Greek *eikon* [εἰκών] ("image" or "likeness") and by far the most common term used to describe Jacob's image, grapples with the same semantic range, which varies from a disembodied face to a bust (Kugel, 1994, p. 119; cf. pp. 110–111). The widespread use of *iqonin* notwithstanding, there is little indication whether the term implied a mask-like, *en buste*, or full-length representation. It is possible that there was no established tradition to that effect and Jacob's image could be imagined in multiple ways, in line with the broad and often interchangeable range of faces, busts, and full bodily forms impressed on Byzantine artifacts in late antiquity and the Middle Ages.[16]

A reference to Jacob's image in the late antique or early medieval anthology of mystical instructions, narratives, and hymns known as *Hekhalot Rabbati* is exceptional in that it unambiguously indicates that Jacob's image was, at least

[15] For the range of meanings associated with prosopon, see Liddell and Scott (1996, p. 1533).

[16] See Kaufmann (2006, pp. 45–53), and Sivertsev (2022, pp. 48–50; 2024, pp. 112–115, 122) for a broader iconographic and literary context.

sometimes, understood precisely as a bust. The reference is unique on multiple counts, including the reference to Jacob's image as *qelaster panim* and the scene of God venerating the image through a series of gestures otherwise associated with icon and relic veneration in Byzantine literature. The passage – constructed as a quote from the divine address to a visionary who ascends through heavenly palaces – runs as follows:

> Bear witness for me to them of what testimony you see in me, of what I do to the countenance [לקלסתר פניו] of Jacob, your father,[17] which is engraved unto me upon the throne of my glory. For at the hour when you say before me "holy", I bend down over it, embrace, caress, and kiss it, and my hands are upon my arms,[18] three times, when you say before me "holy", as it is said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts" (Isaiah 6:3). (Schäfer, 1981, para. 164; trans. Schäfer, 2009, p. 261, with slight modifications).[19]

The section calls on mystics "who descend to the Merkavah" – that is, God's chariot, a concept inspired by visions in Ezekiel 1 and 10 – to serve as witnesses of God's response to Israel's liturgy, specifically the performance of the "holy, holy, holy" chant during the *qedushah*, the prayer that involves the recitation of the angelic song from Isaiah 6:3. God's veneration of Jacob's image, therefore, must be read in light of the unit's broader interest in Israel's recitation of the *qedushah*. The description of Jacob's *qelaster panim*, offered in the context of this veneration, contains reference to the arms and, hence, implies a bust rather than a face. In the words of Rachel Rafael Neis, the image is "sufficiently embodied to receive God's physical attentions" (Neis, 2007, p. 42).[20] The arms allow for the situation of embrace that is central to the description.

Jacob's *qelaster panim*, depicted with arms, is morphologically similar to the *Ladder*'s "face in the middle […] the one of fire, down to the shoulders and arms". The *Ladder* appreciates the ambiguity of *litse*, a word whose semantic range stretches from a disembodied countenance to a bust. The text specifies that in this case the *litse* includes the shoulders and arms, just as *Hekhalot*

[17] Some manuscripts read "their father".

[18] Most manuscripts read "upon my arms". Some manuscripts have "upon its/his arms" instead.

[19] Cf. Neis (2007, pp. 41–42), and Boustan (2015, p. 77), for slightly different translations with important comments.

[20] On the term qelaster panim and its potential range of meanings, see Neis (2007, p. 42, n. 39), and, more recently, Turan (2019, pp. 116–132). For a discussion of the qelaster panim passage in its broader context, see Neis (2007, pp. 36–54); Boustan (2015, pp. 61–81), and Sivertsev (2024, pp. 93–104).

*Rabbati* removes the semantic ambiguity associated with the exact physical shape of Jacob's image by specifying the presence of the arms. The similarity does not necessarily reflect the direct knowledge of *Hekhalot Rabbati* in one form or another within the circles responsible for the composition of the *Ladder*. At the same time, the *Ladder*'s similarity with the Prayer of Jacob, a Jewish incantation preserved in a manuscript from the Cairo Geniza and broadly belonging within the universe of Hekhalot literature, puts such a scenario within the realm of possibility. Whether there is direct knowledge or not, however, the two works seem to inhabit the common universe of gestures, scenes, and formulaic situations – what David Frankfurter calls a "habitus, the socially prescribed and learned modes of carrying and applying the body in public" (Frankfurter, 2018, p. 112). Both texts choose to understand the human face as a bust complete with the arms and shoulders.

Building from a common template, though, does not always imply a common system of meanings. The *Ladder*'s composers either were unfamiliar with the narrative behind the tradition concerning Jacob's image or chose to ignore it. The *Ladder* adopts structural elements from image lore in a rather disjoined manner and then reworks these elements into a new narrative. Building blocks from the older tradition are certainly there, but not the meanings originally associated with these blocks. In this respect, Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl's critique of the tendency to fold the *Ladder* into late antique Jewish traditions concerning Jacob's image is well on target. The two are generated by the same structural matrix. They do not share the same narrative or the common system of meanings. In addition to differences listed by Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl, several other elements in the *Ladder*'s vision indicate that its authors reassembled the original building blocks into a new narrative and associated these blocks with new content.

As noted by Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl, the *Ladder* does not mention the throne on which the image of Jacob is supposedly engraved (Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 63–64). Moreover, the *Ladder*'s "face carved out of fire" is never identified as the image of Jacob. These two connections are lost, even though the face's location relative to other structural elements of the earlier narrative, such as the ladder, remains intact. The *Ladder*'s reference to God "standing above the highest face" also creates a spatial arrangement that almost implies a throne carrying the engraved image, except the throne is not there (LaddJac 1:6; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, p. 203;

trans. Lunt, 1985, p. 407, with revisions).[21] In the *Genesis Rabbah* version of the throne narrative, mentioned earlier in the article, the throne is assumed rather than explicitly identified. Jacob's image is said to be engraved "on high" [למעלן] rather than on the throne (Gen. Rab. 68.12; Theodor & Albeck, 1912–1936, vol. 2, p. 788). The difference is that in the midrash the throne is certainly implied, whereas in the *Ladder* it is most likely not. One can trace, however, the process through which the common textual matrix would allow the throne to become invisible and then disappear altogether. Both scenarios, in other words, are variables within the matrix's realm of possibilities.

The face's multiplication in the form of twenty-four faces set up on the ladder's twelve steps is another such variable. Structurally, the vision situates the topmost face in relation to the faces on the steps: "There were twelve steps leading to the top of the ladder, and on each step to the top there were two human faces, on the right and on the left, twenty-four faces down to their chests. And the face in the middle was higher than all that I saw, the one of fire, down to the shoulders and arms, exceedingly terrifying, more than those twenty-four faces" (LaddJac 1:3–4; Фаль & Фаль, 2017, p. 202; trans. Lunt, 1985, p. 407, with revisions).[22] Once again, the structural matrix remains unchanged, but the narrative explores new scenarios involved in this matrix. The upper face multiplies itself in the form of twenty-four lower faces which, quite literally, lead up to it. All the faces are described as busts. The highest face is more terrifying than the rest, but all of them fall into the same general category of human busts. One can see how the authors of the *Ladder* took the original structure with a face at the top of the ladder and added further elements within that structure by multiplying the face twenty-four times and distributing it along the ladder. This procedure was possibly inspired by the fact that a ladder is the constant attribute of Jacob in Eastern Orthodox iconographic tradition, but also by iconographic sequences of bust images in medieval Byzantine art. A new narrative emerges from within the old structural matrix. The elements within the matrix are multiplied and rearranged to generate new meanings, but the matrix with its formulaic scenes remains identifiable.

[21] The relationship between God and "the highest face" is not entirely clear and may imply the work of an editor. See Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 109, 111, 113).

[22] See Fahl et al. (2015, p. 83, n. 334) for possible interpretations of the face's meaning. The Slavonic text is inconsistent and potentially self-contradictory.

## The Ladder of Jacob as a Byzantine Text

The only chronological certainty in connection with the *Ladder*, note Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl, is the late thirteenth-century date of the *Explanatory Palaea*, the anthology that provides the editorial framework for various recensions of our text. Beyond that, we enter the realm of speculation. Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl further note that the *Ladder*'s text has undergone too many editorial transformations in the course of its history to be datable as a unit. Instead, one must start by exploring the chronological circumstances of individual traditions and motifs within the text. Only then and based on these findings can we attempt to determine whether one can reasonably trace the *Ladder* as a whole back to an original composition (Fahl et al., 2015, p. 93).[23]

Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl suggest a tentative chronology for several segments within the *Ladder*. They assign what is usually understood to be a Christian expansion of the original Jewish exposition of Jacob's dream in *LaddJac* 4:37–75 to the early Byzantine period – that is, sometime between the fourth and seventh centuries. An eleventh-century Geniza manuscript contains a Hebrew version of the Prayer of Jacob in *LaddJac* 2:5–15, but the invocation's text may very well predate the time of the manuscript. It seems prudent, therefore, to assign Jacob's prayer to the period between the sixth and tenth centuries. Finally, the angel's interpretation of Jacob's dream in *LaddJac* 4:1–36 and the interpretation's eschatological underpinnings seem to be a good fit for the second century CE – that is, the time of Bar Kokhba's unsuccessful revolt against Rome (Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 93–94).[24]

This assessment successfully negotiates between the two prevailing tendencies in modern scholarship on the *Ladder*. Nathaniel Bonwetsch, who was the first to introduce the *Ladder* to a broad European audience, assigns the text's final editorial stage to the sixth or seventh century and generally situates the *Ladder*'s

[23] Cf. Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 11, 79) for further observations.

[24] See Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 60, 78–79, 81–84, 90–91) for further discussion of the second century as a potential context. Cf. Böttrich (2019, pp. 174–181, esp. 180) for the argument's English summary. Throughout the article, Böttrich oscillates between an attempt to list identifiable redactional layers within the Ladder and the realisation that the history of the text makes any such identification difficult.

formation within the apocalyptic mood characteristic of seventh-century Byzantium. He also argues, however, that Christian components were grafted onto a much older apocalyptic tradition. Bonwetsch never elaborates on what this older tradition might have been (Bonwetsch, 1900, p. 86). A more recent argument, made most forcefully by Kugel, seeks to situate the work's early stratum in the Second Temple period – perhaps before the Maccabean revolt in the second century BCE. The work was further expanded in the wake of the failed Jewish revolts against Rome in 70 and 135 CE. Kugel's argument stems primarily from his analysis of the interpretation of Jacob's dream in *LaddJac* 4:1–36, which he situates within the broader rabbinic vision of history as a succession of world empires that dominate Israel. Some parts of Kugel's argument are convincing; other parts are a stretch, including a chronological leap from late antique rabbinic sources to the proposed Second Temple milieu of the *Ladder*'s original composition.[25] The Second Temple chronology, however, has been broadly accepted by Fossum and Orlov (see Fossum, 1995, p. 148; Orlov, 2006, p. 259). Lunt remains noncommittal but also seems to be leaning in favour of a first-century date (Lunt, 1985, pp. 401, 404–405, esp. 404, n. 3, and 405, n. 10). Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl's second-century chronology for *LaddJac* 4:1–36 should be placed in the context of previous scholarship and its preference for assigning the *Ladder*'s Jewish core to a relatively early period.

In reality, the early date of Jacob's vision in *LaddJac* 1:1–13 and the vision's interpretation in *LaddJac* 4:1–36 are far from certain. The earliest known references to Jacob's image engraved on the throne of God appear in fifth-century midrashic anthologies, such as *Lamentations Rabbah* and *Genesis Rabbah*, making this part of Jacob lore almost certainly a late antique development.[26] Of the texts analysed in this chapter, the Targum Neofiti is notoriously hard to date. The period between the third and fifth centuries seems to be the current consensus, but a later timeframe is not out of the question either.[27] The *Hekhalot Rabbati*'s chronology is equally nebulous. The anthology likely includes Byzantine strata (the *qelaser panim* segment being one of prime contenders), but the collection's editing could have continued well into the Middle Ages.[28]

[25] Kugel (1995, pp. 222–224). Published a decade later, Kugel (2006, p. 32) admits that, on balance, a pre-Maccabean date is "problematic" and opts for "the early to mid-first century C.E.".

[26] For a detailed version of this argument, see Sivertsev (2024, pp. 65–106).

[27] See Alexander (1990, p. 246) and, more recently, Flesher and Chilton (2011, pp. 156–157).

[28] On Hekhalot Rabbati's complex textual history, see Schäfer (1988, pp. 63–74; 2009, p. 245), as well as Boustan (2007, pp. 18–38) and the literature cited therein.

In other words, the vision's structural affinity with traditions concerning Jacob's image makes it almost impossible to date *LaddJac* 1:1–13 to before the fifth century. This, in turn, calls into question an early date for the vision's interpretation in *LaddJac* 4:1–36. Potential parallels with the predominantly late antique and early medieval rabbinic sources outlined by Kugel support rather than disprove this line of argument.[29]

Moreover, the fact that the groups behind Jacob's vision in the *Ladder* no longer felt constrained by the original image narrative – instead experimenting with the narrative's structural elements to produce a new storyline – may indicate a degree of discontinuity with tradition. This, in turn, points to an even later date. Any time between the sixth and thirteenth centuries is a possibility. In my opinion, the vision in the *Ladder* is an early medieval work that repurposes earlier traditions regarding Jacob's image and weaves their elements into a new narrative. We find ourselves operating within the chronological parameters outlined by Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl for the Christian expansion in *LaddJac* 4:37–75 and the Prayer of Jacob in *LaddJac* 2:5–15.

Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl note that whereas, in theory, the *Ladder*'s early Jewish component can be isolated from the rest of the narrative, the two are fully intertwined within a "dense network of intra- and intertextual references" on the level of the text (Fahl et al., 2015, pp. 29–30).[30] I would like to take this observation a step further: It is unclear to me whether the early component exists at all as an identifiable editorial stage – that is, a stage which is editorially different from the rest of the narrative, including the so-called Christian expansion. Fahl, Böttrich, and Fahl suggest "a religious milieu that lies at the intersection of various Jewish-Christian traditions" as a potential setting in which the Prayer of Jacob was added to the narrative (Fahl et al., 2015, p. 35).[31] I would expand this suggestion to include most of the material from the pre-*Palaea* stage. The *Ladder* comes into focus as, fundamentally, a product of Byzantine literary culture and associated composition techniques. Its production and circulation involved multiple layers of editing, translation, and textual reinvention over an extended period from late antiquity to the thirteenth century. The result was a polymorphous text equal to the sum of its iterations across manuscripts and languages.

[29] See, however, Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 60–62, 95–96) for a more cautious assessment of rabbinic parallels and their value for understanding the Ladder's textual history.

[30] Cf. Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 4, 78) for a version of the argument.

[31] On authors and audiences implied by the Ladder's various editorial stages, see Fahl et al. (2015, pp. 90–91).

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## Appendix: Earlier Editions of the Slavonic *Ladder of Jacob* Consulted by the Author

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## W poszukiwaniu nieuchwytnego żydowskiego rdzenia. *Drabina Jakuba* odczytana na nowo

Artykuł na nowo podejmuje dyskusję nad potencjalnym wpływem żydowskich tradycji dotyczących wizerunku Jakuba wyrytego na Tronie Chwały na wizję Jakuba w słowiańskiej *Drabinie Jakuba*. Wpływ ten, po raz pierwszy zasugerowany przez Jamesa Kugela, został ostatnio zakwestionowany przez Sabine Fahl i Christfrieda Böttricha. W artykule dowodzi się, że zamiast skupiać się na różnicach treściowych między tymi dwoma narracjami, należy zbadać tradycję dotyczącą wizerunku Jakuba jako scenę o charakterze formułowym, która umożliwia tworzenie nowych treści poprzez selektywne ponowne zestawianie i wykorzystywanie jej elementów strukturalnych. Twórcy *Drabiny Jakuba* albo nie znali narracji stojącej za tą strukturą, albo zdecydowali się ją pominąć. Zamiast tego *Drabina Jakuba* przejmuje poszczególne elementy tradycji dotyczącej wizerunku Jakuba, a następnie zestawia je na nowo, tworząc nową narrację. Artykuł wykorzystuje relację między *Drabiną Jakuba* a żydowskimi tradycjami dotyczącymi wizerunku Jakuba jako punkt wyjścia do szerszej argumentacji na rzecz tego tekstu jako dzieła literatury bizantyńskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** „Drabina Jakuba"; wizerunek Jakuba; język hebrajski; język grecki; język staro-cerkiewno-słowiański; literatura bizantyńska; „Hekhalot Rabbati"; targum; midrasz

## In search of an elusive Jewish core: The *Ladder of Jacob* revisited

The article revisits the discussion about the potential influence of Jewish traditions concerning the image of Jacob engraved on the Throne of Glory on Jacob's vision in the Slavonic *Ladder of Jacob*. First suggested by James Kugel, the influence of Jewish traditions associated with Jacob's engraved image has been recently called into question by Sabine Fahl and Christfried Böttrich. The article argues that instead of focusing on differences in content between the two narratives, one must explore the tradition on Jacob's image as a formulaic scene that allows for the creation of new content through the selective reassembly and re-use of the scene's structural elements. The *Ladder*'s composers were either unfamiliar with the narrative behind the structure, or they chose to ignore that narrative. Instead, the *Ladder* adopts individual building blocks from the tradition on the image of Jacob and then reassembles these blocks into a new narrative. The article uses the relationship between the *Ladder* and Jewish traditions on the image of Jacob as a starting point for a broader argument about the *Ladder* as a product of Byzantine literature.

**Keywords:** "The Ladder of Jacob"; Jacob's image; Hebrew language; Greek language; Old Church Slavonic language; Byzantine literature; Hekhalot Rabbati; targum; midrash

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