

**“A ladder was set up on the earth,
the top of it reaching to heaven” (Genesis 28,10-22)**

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English translation of the
original text in Italian published in:
Traditio Scalabriniana. Sussidi per l'approfondimento
n. 21 (Giugno 2015)

At the centre of the life of G. B. Scalabrini

It's not surprising to find a ladder in the episcopal emblem of the Blessed G. B. Scalabrini: in fact his name mentions a ladder. If we look at it more closely, however, we realise that the one represented in his emblem is not just any ladder. It is in fact the one dreamt about by Jacob in an episode recounted in the first book of the Bible.

One could immediately ask: why does this hold such interest? That episode from the life of the Patriarch Jacob is evocative, yes, but it's only a dream – and often dreams are shown to be an illusion! And yet Jesus himself referred precisely to that dream in speaking about himself in an important moment of the first week of his mission. As we read in St John's Gospel: “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (1,51). And we can't take this as an isolated reference, given the following statement that

“In St John's Christology, it seems that the verbs *ascend* and *descend* have a role of notable importance. In fact, Jesus will ascend into Heaven where He was before” (John 6,62). He will ascend to the Father (cp. John 20,17). But this ascension is not to be understood unless connected to the opposite movement, that of descent, according to the revelation of Jesus himself: ‘No one has ever risen to Heaven, except the One who descended from Heaven, the Son of Man’ (John 3,13). And it is particularly on the descent that John dwells most, perhaps because the idea of the Ascension of the Divinity was undisputed and shared: it appears also in Gnosticism, in late Judaic apocalyptic documents and even in ancient Greek literature. Whereas the matter of Descent constitutes an important original point in Christian Faith, because it opens the mystery of the Incarnation.”¹

Thus we discover that even the emblem of Bishop Scalabrini refers to the core of his life, i.e. to the person of Jesus, *ladder* between heaven and earth, as his own writings and those who knew him testify: “Jesus Christ must live in us. Jesus Christ must continuously work in us because he alone can reconcile heaven and earth”.² And it is exactly this *mystery of descent* that Scalabrini sees realised fully in the Eucharist:

¹ See Gabriele Bentoglio, “Video Dominum innixum scalae”, *Scalabriniani* n. 1, Gennaio-Febbraio 2007, 28.

² Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, “Lettera Pastorale per la Santa Quaresima del 1883” [Pastoral Letter for the Lent of 1883], Piacenza 1883, 13-14, in *Scalabrini. A Living Voice*, 1987, 12.

“Here all of us feel – sincerely, not hypocritically – that we are brothers and sisters. Here, before our common Father, all distinctions based on ostentation, riches and human power disappear. Here we claim to be equal and all do feel equal at the common banquet of Jesus. Here before the spectacle of a God who in the Blessed Sacrament lowers himself equally before the small and the great and raises all things to his loftiness, we consecrate not the false democracy of the world but the true democracy of all the redeemed.”³

It is indeed worth looking more closely at the account in Genesis 28,10-22.

Jacob’s Journey (Genesis 28,10-11)

Jacob left Bersabea in the direction of Carran. He then reached a place where he passed the night, since the sun had set; he took a stone, placed it as his pillow and lay down there.

It is a difficult moment in Jacob’s life. The journey he has begun is a long one: it meant traversing at least 1600 kilometres on foot, across Palestine and Syria so as to enter Mesopotamia, i.e. present-day Iraq, to reach the place which Abraham had left a long time before: Carran, known today as Harran, in Turkish territory.

Jacob’s journey is a dramatic flight. He is afraid. He has been forced to distance himself from his family because of conflict with his brother, whom he himself has cheated! It’s the drama of the fight between brothers that began with Cain and Abel, and that will continue with Joseph and his brothers. From its first pages the Bible doesn’t cover up our difficulty in living as brothers; it comes to us with sensible realism, which however doesn’t reduce or curtail the hope that it is possible to live that communion in the midst of the diversities for which we were made.

From the indications given us by the Bible, Jacob must have had three days’ travel behind him: so he’s now distant from his points of reference. On the other hand, his goal is still very distant. He doesn’t know exactly where he is. The text speaks of a “place”, the name of which will be given only at the end of the story, a place therefore unknown at the moment, and totally foreign to Jacob.

When night comes, he organises himself to sleep outside, in the open: an unusual circumstance in the context of the time. All the more so since, as we’ll see at the end of the story, the place he’s in is near a city. Perhaps the situation of someone in flight, of someone who needs to keep hidden, hasn’t allowed him even to ask for shelter, or perhaps he hasn’t found it... In fact, he has to sleep out of doors.

Jacob’s situation, therefore, is one that we wouldn’t wish on anyone, but what is about to happen suggests to us that even the most difficult situation needs to be valued, because it can open into unexpected possibilities.

Jacob’s Dream (Genesis 28,12-15)

³ Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, “Per l’inaugurazione del Tempio del Carmine in Piacenza” [For the inauguration of the Carmine Temple in Piacenza], 17 febbraio 1894, in *Scalabrini. A Living Voice*, 1987, 27.

Then he had a dream: a ladder was set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him...

Jacob dreams of a ladder that joins Earth to Heaven and by means of which God brings Himself close to him. The only thing said about that ladder is that it is used by angels that climb and descend. It's too little to say that Heaven and Earth are well connected! The two verbs used to describe the movement of the angels are those the Bible uses to synthesize God's intervention, the liberation of his people, salvation: God *descends* in order to *lead his people out of*, or rather *up from*, Egypt (as for example in Exodus 3,8).⁴

The God of the Bible is the God who saves: for this He descends, becomes close to Man, in order to liberate him and raise him up. He comes near to Jacob also, to a man who is in flight because he has deceived his brother, to a man who is abandoned by all, who finds himself in a place that is totally foreign to him and has no one to protect him.

And God speaks to Jacob in his dream! He presents Himself firstly as the *God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac*. We can imagine the surprise of one who is far from home, in a place where he thinks he knows no one, and who suddenly meets someone who says to him: "I know your family, your story, the situation you are fleeing from: I know you."

And this "I know you" is not followed by any remonstrance or threat, but by a promise that is truly unexpected, given the situation: it is the promise of land, of descendants and of a blessing that encompasses all. The disproportion between Jacob's situation and the words God addresses to him is enormous. And yet this boundless promise is the most true reality.

The assurance of a presence is added to this: *Here I am with you...* In the Bible these are the key-words of the covenant, the words through which God engages personally with Mankind. And such a Presence is expressed through a very definite proximity: *I will protect you wherever you go; then I will bring you back to this land, because I will not abandon you without doing all I promised you.*

"This is none other than the house of God" (Genesis 28,16-22)

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!" And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

On his awakening, Jacob first of all expresses his amazement, his surprise: *I did not know it*. What he had experienced as a place unknown to him, in which he had felt alone and abandoned by all, had been revealed as a place filled with the presence of God. Consequently, the text immediately signals the experience of fear before God, that is the experience of recognising oneself as small before something overpowering!

⁴ Instead of *lead out* the Bible says *lead up* because of the difference of altitude between Egypt and the Promised Land.

And that place Jacob now recognises *as the house of God, the gateway to heaven*. They are words of great significance from which we understand that the experience Jacob has had is that of having been received into a house, the very house of God! This is confirmed by the new name this place, which until that moment had remained anonymous, will receive, a name that will forever carry the memory of the experience Jacob has had, the experience of discovering one is received by God: *Betel*, that is, *house of God*.

This is the experience that permits Jacob to trust a promise and to take up his journey again, with confidence. The earlier problems remain, nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed.

The gestures that Jacob carries out on awakening – a stone raised and smeared with oil, a new name given to the place, an undertaking expressed in a vow – tell us that he has taken seriously the experience he has had, and wants to remember it. He knows that even the deepest experiences, those that affect our lives and allow us to make courageous choices, can fade for various reasons (a disappointment, a strong feeling that suddenly overtakes us, a negative event...). He knows that such experiences are to be sustained with facts, with the choices that bind us!

Significantly, when Jacob, shortly before he dies, blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, he refers to that dream and to that meeting with God (cp. Genesis 48,3). At a distance of so many years, he recognises that God has been faithful, and he speaks of Him as a Pastor and an Angel who has delivered him from all evil (cp. Genesis 48,15-16). The verb used for the angel in that case is the famous verb of ransom, in the original language *ga'al*: it refers to the duty that concerned the nearest relative who had the task of protecting, guarding, redeeming, vindicating the relative in difficulty. At the end of his life, therefore, Jacob will recognise that when he was on his journey, abandoned by everyone, God acted with him as an angel who protected and liberated him, exactly like a relative ransoming him.

Jesus Christ, *ladder* between Heaven and Earth

With Jesus – as St John's Gospel says (1,51) – that dream has definitely become reality. With a phrase that commands our attention precisely because it appears unexpectedly, Jesus speaks of Himself by making reference to Jacob's dream. Bruno Maggioni points out in his commentary: "In the evangelical re-reading, the verb *open* – *anoigo* – is used as a passive past participle (*opened*): this suggests that the opening of the Heavens is now a permanent fact. And it also changes the object to be seen: which is no longer the ladder, but the Son of Man".⁵

In other words, Jesus is saying: "I am the ladder in person!". So: Jacob's dream has been realised definitively and God's welcome in relation to Mankind has an actual face: that of Jesus, of Him who is "the kiss of peace between heaven and earth".⁶

⁵ Bruno Maggioni, *Il racconto di Giovanni* (Assisi, 2006), 69.

⁶ Giovanni Battista Scalabrini, *Lettera Pastorale per la Santa Quaresima del 1878* [Pastoral Letter for Lent in 1878], Piacenza 1878, 21, in *Scalabrini. A Living Voice*, 1987, 11.

Yes, the measure of how much we are personally received by God is not given to us through sentiment, which is there today and gone tomorrow, but we discover it by entering into an always deeper knowledge of the real story of Jesus of Nazareth, of His life-style, His actions, His words. It is He who with His life – a life wholly *for us*... from Bethlehem to Calvary – has revealed the extent of the Father's welcome, a welcome that is measureless.

He who discovers it and makes this certainty the centre of his own life – as Blessed G.B. Scalabrini did – learns to look at himself and everyone else, at events and the whole of history, with new eyes. Whoever finds himself welcomed into the House of God no less, learns to welcome everyone, friends and even enemies.

There is a Way on which to walk

Certainly, becoming persons who are welcoming is the journey of a lifetime, a path that can know successes and failures, tiredness and new energy, pauses and revivals. It's not by chance that Jesus' affirmation begins with a verb in the future tense: "You will see...". Bruno Maggioni comments: "In order to manifest himself Jesus has need of a future"⁷, a future that had already resounded at the moment of calling the first disciples, recounted by John a little earlier: "Come and you will see" (1,39).

"The call is in the imperative, as always [...]. 'You will see' is, instead, in the future tense. Jesus does not say what they will see and when. It is while being with Him that the future will disclose itself. Following Jesus doesn't mean knowing already where he is leading. [...] Therefore the accuracy of the research doesn't lie in knowing already exactly what one wants, where one is going, but rather in placing oneself on the right way, prepared to follow it wherever it may lead."⁸

The preparedness to walk is revealed therefore as decisive for Christian life, even more for those who are involved more closely in the reality of migration. It's significant that the present basic text of the Scalabrinian Traditio concludes precisely with a reference to the Way.

"The difference between the ideal given to us and the daily reality is to be understood as a laboratory in which it is possible to grow together. Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord, is the Way: in Him every step towards communion, moved by faith in the Father's promise, becomes prophecy and anticipation of His Kingdom". (Basic text of the Scalabrinian Traditio, 6)

[Translated from Italian to English by Fr. Antonio Paganoni cs]

⁷ Bruno Maggioni, *Il racconto di Giovanni* (Assisi, 2006), 68.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.