

9.21

## **John 1:51—Allusion to Jacob’s Ladder**

In the first chapter of John’s Gospel Jesus tells the curious Nathanael, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1:51).

The key to understanding this cryptic comment involves recognition that Jesus is making an allusion to the vision of a ladder that the Old Testament patriarch Jacob beheld in a dream: “And he dreamed that there was 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” (Gen 28:12).

That memorable image would inspire countless literary allusions, including in recent times, the rock songs “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin and “Jacob’s Ladder” by Huey Lewis and the News. But nineteen hundred years before those compositions, the author of John’s Gospel portrayed Jesus as reimagining the image with himself as the ladder.

Theologians would be impressed. Augustine understood it to mean Christ was the pathway to salvation; Martin Luther took it as a symbol of the Incarnation; John Calvin read it as presenting Christ as the mediator between God and humanity.

And Charles Wesley (1707–88) composed a hymn:

What doth the ladder mean,  
Sent down from the Most High?  
Fasten'd to earth its foot is seen,  
Its summit to the sky.  
Lo, up and down the scale  
The angels swiftly move  
And God, the great Invisible  
Himself appears above!

Jesus that ladder is,  
Th' incarnate Deity,  
Partaker of celestial bliss,  
And human misery.  
Sent from His high abode,  
To sleeping mortals given,  
He stands, and man unites to God  
And earth connects to heaven.