

# *Education & Enlightenment*

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## **Jacobs Ladder**

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*The paper makes reference to the two ladders of Scottish Rite – found in 18<sup>th</sup> degree and 30<sup>th</sup> degree*

The symbol of Jacob's Ladder is encountered in Genesis 28:10-22 during the dream of Jacob on his journey from Beersheba, the site of his dream he names Bethel. It is the only symbol used in Craft Masonry to be found formally within the Bible.

The concept of a ladder rising from the earth to Heaven exists in many other belief systems. It is seen in Mithraism, an early Roman religion derived from the beliefs of the Persians; Brahmanism, a Vedic religious belief system which is strongly associated with early Hinduism, the Scala Naturae (Ladder of Nature) of Plato and the neo-Platonic school, the ladder to Heaven of Buddhism and is described in the Pyramid texts of the Ancient Egyptians.

The Ladder of Jacob is an apocryphal or pseudepigraphical text of the Old Testament, preserved only in Old Church Slavonic, translated from Greek, and likely from ancient Hebrew. It describes a form of Merkabah mysticism, an early Jewish dogma concerning the ascent to Heaven by a chariot as described in Ezekiel's vision, the same source as the principal banners of the Royal Arch degree.

Jacob's Ladder first appeared in Masonic ritual in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; either introduced in 1776 by Thomas Dunckerley (a senior 18<sup>th</sup> Century English mason who is likely to have created the Mark Degree, heavily promoted the royal Arch, and was the first Grand Master of the masonic order of the Knights Templar), or in 1760 as described by George Oliver in 1837. There is also the parallel of the winding staircase of the second degree tracing board, which references three, five, or seven stairs.

In masonry we concentrate on the first three rungs or staves of the ladder, representing the cardinal virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity. Preston describes the ladder as having many rounds but three principal. Certain versions of the ritual of the Entered Apprentice tracing board describe a ladder of seven staves, the three principal virtues accompanied by Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice.

In the mysteries of Mithras and Brahma the ladder contains seven rungs, which represent the seven celestial bodies recognised in ancient times. The Hebrew Kabbalists considered the ladder to have ten rungs, each representing one of the ten Sefhira, the successive emanations of God in the creation of the world. The hermetic freemasons of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries believed the seven rungs of the Ladder of Kadosh (of the 30<sup>th</sup> degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish rite) symbolised Justice, Equality, Kindness, Good Faith, Labor, Patience and Intelligence and

likewise Justice, Charity, Innocence, Sweetness, Faith, Firmness and Truth, the Greater Work.

The symbolism of the ladder as a whole is expressed similarly across all mystery religions and in Freemasonry as a metaphor for the progressive development of man. The exoteric explanation of the ladder found within the EA lecture is literal, but there is a further esoteric or hidden explanation.

Wilmschurt wrote in 1924 that *“Jacob’s vision and ladder, therefore, exemplify the attainment of Initiation, the expansion of consciousness that comes when the Light of the centre is found...”*

In the Hebrew Kabbalah, the Tree of Life represents a schema by which the ten successive emanations of God created the universe. Burkle posited that the Tree of Life could represent a 7 staved ladder, and that progression up the ladder could be seen as evolution of the spirit towards knowledge of and oneness with the Supreme Architect. He further suggests that Jacob’s Ladder is just one reflection of the Platonic and Neoplatonic concept of the Ladder of Nature, which can be further expressed as the Great Chain of Being, a theory that all life is hierarchically ranked, from the divine to the mundane, from the most perfect to the least.

This philosophy appears to have been introduced into Christianity by the philosopher Thomas Aquinas, and evolved through the Renaissance period, driven by such enlightened minds as Spinoza, Linneaus and Leibniz. It is exemplified in many of the writings of Shakespeare. The philosophy is discussed in the teachings of Martinism, and can be seen further to be a metaphor for the process of Reintegration. Interestingly, this occurred in the same period as Dunckerley likely introduced Jacob’s Ladder in to Freemasonry. In esoteric masonry, we see the concept developed as a

subtext in the meaning of the Holy Royal Arch, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> degree of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

In our masonic ritual, Jacob's Ladder is a powerful symbol of how we can follow the teachings of the Volume of the Sacred Law and fulfil the moral and religious duties of our faith, and lead our thoughts toward Heaven. The symbolism is however far deeper, and encompasses an ancient tradition whereby man as the microcosm can ascend towards the macrocosm through virtue and thus the goal of Reintegration can be accomplished by the spiritual development and evolution of the soul.

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