

How to read Scripture

I used to meet on Saturday mornings in the back room of a local restaurant with about 20 retired men – mostly of a professional background – to read and discuss the books of the Bible – old and new Testaments. This was about 40 years ago and it continued over the subsequent years – the group growing smaller as time took its toll on the members.

They were all laymen – ordained ministers were banned. They wanted to take their own bearings on the writings – and so they began with Genesis and trudged their way through week after week until the closing book of the New Testament – at which point they reverted back to Genesis and started the quest over again – and again. And it being a lot of reading and discussion to do, each cycle took a few years – while the group dwindled to maybe ten? The “group” continues to meet every Saturday, after an interval taken to respond to the Covid pandemic, and the group now consists of two, me and a local once Lutheran and now Presbyterian elder.

We had reached last Saturday the Genesis episode in which the patriarch Jacob, en route to find a wife in his ancestral country, stops for the night to sleep and has a dream. It's of a stairway reaching from earth into the heavens upon which angels of God descend and ascend – as if on an escalator. And the Lord appears in this dream promising Jacob and his descendants a future (as Israelites) that will become a blessing for all the families of the earth. Upon this, Jacob awakens frightened and says: *How awesome this place is! This is nothing else but the house of God, the gateway to heaven.*

How might one read and understand that episode? For centuries probably people took it literally – as a description of what actually happened. Jacob was travelling, became tired, went to sleep and had a dream that promised a future – and the dream was real – the ladder and the angels were real – and the words spoken by the Lord were remembered and recorded by Jacob – for who else was there?

Reading the passage that way – literally – leaves the event at a vast distance of time and space from us today. We read it and maybe wonder why such episodes don't seem to happen to us – as to the saints of old. But Church tradition has always allowed that such a story can be your story – in its deeper sense. Read yourself into it – take the place of Jacob; experience his dream everyday of your life and get to know yourself better. Everyday – as you sleepily go through your routine existence – angels link you to the very source of your Being – taking up your concerns and drawing down hope, expectations, nudging your imagination to sense that your life has meaning – a destiny, making you realize that this world, after all, is the domain of its Maker and everyday a gateway to something new, unanticipated – and so it's time to wake up and get moving.

Such a reading of Scripture reels the episode in from thousands of years ago and makes it a present event – *your* event to interpret as only *you* can.

Geoff Wood