

JACOB'S LADDAR A REAL NIGHTMARE

Things can really get screwed up. Take the story about Jacob's ladder, for example.

Those who remember the incident from Sabbath or Sunday School may recall a picture of a handsome youth napping on the ground. A sort of heavenly escalator zooms upward, and a hoard of angels appears to be trooping up and down the stairs.

The moral of the story usually comes across like this: The Lord was appearing to Jacob to assure the young man that he would enjoy divine protection on his journey. Sweet dreams, Jake, and keep on smiling.

Horse feathers! What Jacob experienced as he slept was a nightmare, not some pleasant vision. Check it out for yourself in the Jewish scriptures at Genesis 28. But be sure to put it in its proper perspective.

Jacob wasn't taking a midwinter vacation to Florida. He was running for his life. He and his mother had connived to fool his old man into giving him the family blessing. In the process he had cheated his twin brother out of his rightful inheritance.

Brother Esau was mad. "As soon as Dad dies," he swore, "I'm going to kill Jacob." The boys' mother got wind of her elder son's scheme. So she sent her favorite, Jacob, back to their ancestral homeland, ostensibly to find a wife.

That's where Genesis 28 picks up the story. Jacob packed his bags and headed east. The first night out he camped at a local shrine, one of the ancient worship centers that dotted the land. Using one of the sacred stones as a pillow, he fell asleep.

And dreamed. A stair-like ramp stretched from ground floor up into the heavens. Divine messengers kept climbing up and down. Finally Yahweh, the Lord God himself, climbed down and stood next to Jacob.

That would be enough to scare the stuffing out of anybody. Keep in mind that in ancient times people thought that each different household or territory had its own gods.

In all likelihood Jacob assumed that when he escaped his father's oasis, he had also left his father's God, Yahweh, behind. He expected whatever deity was worshiped at this local motel-shrine to be in charge here.

Imagine his dismay to discover that Yahweh had followed him on his journey. "I am the God of your Pa and your Grandpa," announced the Lord. "I'm going to stick with you wherever you go, and I won't leave until I've done with you."

Jacob shook off his nightmare. "Yahweh is here," he concluded, "and I didn't know it!"

When dawn came he turned his stone pillow into a roadside marked and renamed the shrine "Beth-El," which means "House of God."

Then he resumed his journey, vowing to donate ten percent of the profits from his trip to the shrine if he would return safely.

What do you make of that? It just goes to show how perfectly good stories can get messed up.

How the frightening account of Jacob's nightmare got twisted into pleasant dream is anybody's guess. Perhaps, as often happens, overly pious teachers sugar-coated the realism in the ancient account and turned it into an innocuous reverie.

The biblical writer had more going for him than that, however. He wanted to underscore a revolutionary understanding of how God works with people.

Most folks imagine that God does his thing with nice guys. If God is up to something good, he probably uses good people to get the work done.

The author Genesis, however, had another ax to grind. He wanted to show that Yahweh, the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was different.

This God drafts some of the worst types into his service. Including a conniving, underhanded son-of-a-gun like Jacob.

Jacob's nightmare at Beth-El underscores this thesis. He might have been able to defraud his dad and brother, but he couldn't weasel away from the Lord.

How did it work out? Did Jacob ever learn his lesson? More about that in the next column, which zeroes in on another weird night-time event: a bizarre wrestling match on Jacob's return trip.