



A New Approach to the Apocryphal *Ladder of Jacob**

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Abstract

For a long time the apocryphal *Ladder of Jacob* was accessible only in arbitrarily selected translations. Without a critical edition and a comprehensive study of the whole textual segment, scholars were unable to evaluate its significance for Early Jewish and Christian literature. Since 2015/17, with the publication of a new critical edition and German translation (accompanied by a detailed introduction, footnote commentaries and appendices with related texts), a new approach to this important but hitherto widely unknown text has been made possible. This approach verifies the different layers or strata in the text, which are: a supposed Jewish apocalypse (mid-second century), a Christian expansion of the angels speech in light of the *praeparatio evangelica* tradition (fourth–seventh centuries), a Jewish mystical prayer (eleventh century) and the incorporation of this narrative block into the *Tolkovaja Paleja* together with a series of exegetical commentaries (end of the thirteenth century). In the light of the new approach, it can be said that the *Ladder of Jacob* is most of all an outstanding example of mutual relations between Jewish and Christian theology.

Keywords: *Ladder of Jacob*, Jewish apocalypticism, *Adversus Judaeos* literature, Slavonic apocrypha, messianic tradition, mystical prayer, Narration of Afroditian, *Paleja* literature.

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1. Introduction

The Old Testament pseudepigraphical writings in Slavonic contain some of the most complicated examples of Jewish theology in the Christian tradition.¹ Only a few texts have Greek parallels; most of them are only preserved in the Old Slavonic language. As such, it is not easy to determine whether they possess a Jewish or Christian character. Indeed, with regard to the ongoing debate concerning the provenance of the Pseudepigrapha,² Old Slavonic texts, based on manuscripts originating at the earliest to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, are in a weak position to confirm or refute the alleged Jewish origin of particular works. These have to bear the burden of proof on their own.

Some of the Slavonic pseudepigraphical works are preserved as single texts, copied as independent manuscripts; others are incorporated loosely in mixed miscellanies or form part of thematically specific anthologies.³ The apocryphal *Ladder of Jacob* seems to be a classic example of the latter. It exists only as a textual segment of the so-called *Tolkovaja Paleja*, an anthology which can in general be seen as one of the most important repositories of Jewish apocryphal traditions on Slavic soil. We possess no separate manuscript of the work or, indeed, reference to its existence apart from the ‘Paleja’ collection.⁴

As a result of this situation, the *Ladder of Jacob* has thus far been perceived as having a complex structure, from which scholars have felt free to extract the one part they considered to be an authentic

1. L. DiTommaso and C. Böttrich (eds.), *The Old Testament Apocrypha in the Slavonic Tradition. Continuity and Diversity* (TSAJ, 140; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

2. J. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (JSJSup, 105; Leiden: Brill 2005); see also the review by Rivka Nir in *Henoch* 30 (2008), pp. 144-51.

3. A. de Santmas Otero, ‘Alttestamentliche Pseudepigrapha und die sogenannte “Tolkovaja Paleja” [TP]’, in D. Papandreou, W. A. Bienert and K. Schäferdiek (eds.), *Oecumenica et Patristica: FS W. Schneemelcher* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1989), pp. 107-22.

4. The only exception is an extensive quotation of *LaddJac* in a letter of the monk Savva from 1488 (among other excerpts from the *Paleja*)—but this belongs already to the history of the text’s reception; cf. later, n. 26.

Jewish apocalypse.⁵ Yet the whole segment based on Genesis 28 consists of various elements—such as a christological expansion of the angel's speech and a series of commentaries—which together form a closely related unit. The *Ladder of Jacob* is known to us only in this wider compositional whole.⁶ To understand its character, we need to analyze the entire work, and avoid working simply with more or less randomly chosen fragments.

It was only relatively recently that it became possible to study the *Ladder of Jacob* in its complete textual extent, thanks to the publication of a new critical edition⁷ and a German translation offering detailed notes and explanations.⁸ This edition and translation, using some hitherto unknown manuscripts, was part of a wider project dealing with the Paleja literature in general.⁹ Indeed, without a better understanding of this corpus as the essential background, it would not

5. This is the case in the five standard translations: G.N. Bonwetsch, 'Die apokryphe Leiter Jakobs', in *NGWG.PH 7* (1900), pp. 76-87; A.E. Pennington, 'The Ladder of Jacob', in H.F.D. Sparks (ed), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 453-63; H.G. Lunt, 'Ladder of Jacob (c. First Century A.D): A New Translation and Introduction', in *OTP*, II, pp. 401-11; M. Enrietti, 'Scala di Giacobbe', in P. Sacchi (ed), *Apocrifi dell'Antico Testamento 3* (Brescia: Paideia, 1999), pp. 551-70; J. Petkov, *Altislavische Eschatologie: Texte und Studien zur apokalyptischen Literatur in kirchenslavischer Überlieferung* (Tübingen: Francke, 2016), pp. 319-29. Recently the *Ladder of Jacob* has appeared again: see A. Kulik and S. Minov (eds.), *Biblical Pseudepigrapha in Slavonic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 276-319, based on a critical edition of Mss B and S (our abbreviation) alongside with a synoptic English translation; this presentation has also cut off the following commentaries (including the first one inserted between *LaddJac* 1.5//1.6), and already the christological expansion after *LaddJac* 4.36.

6. Concerning this problem, cf. L.I. Lied, 'Text—Work—Manuscript: What Is an "Old Testament Pseudepigraphon"?', *JSPE* 25 (2015), pp. 150-56.

7. S. Fahl' and D. Fahl' (= Fahl), 'Lestvica Jakova. Kritičeskij tekst', in *TODRL* 65 (2017), pp. 107-22.

8. C. Böttrich and S. Fahl in collaboration with D. Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs* (JSHRZ, NF I/6; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2015), pp. 1-280. This book provides access to all three recensions of the Paleja, marked in the textual layout and explained in a critical apparatus.

9. The result will appear soon in 2019 - cf. C. Böttrich and E. Vodolazkin (ed), *Die Kurze Chronographische Paleja* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2019); volume 1: S. Fahl and D. Fahl, *Die Kurze Chronographische Paleja. Kritische Edition mit deutscher Übersetzung, auf der Grundlage der editio princeps von E. Vodolazkin and T. Rudi*; volume 2: D. Fahl, S. Fahl and C. Böttrich with assistance of M. Šibaev and I. Christov, *Die Kurze Chronographische Paleja. Einführung, Kommentar, Indices*.

be possible to develop an adequate interpretation of all the older (Jewish or Christian) traditions it contains.

The new insights gained by the study of the Paleja also open up a new approach to the *Ladder of Jacob* itself. In what follows, I would like briefly to present three particular aspects of this text that are especially important for biblical scholars.

2. A Text with Many Layers

The ‘Tolkovaja Paleja’ is clearly a composite work, compiled from a large number of different sources.¹⁰ Its genre is that of an anthology, collecting the most prominent Old Testament narratives dealing with the creation of the world up to the reign of King Solomon. Long passages simply repeat the Bible text according to its Slavonic translation. Others, in turn, are in the form of paraphrases and belong to the genre of ‘rewritten Bible’.¹¹ However, most valuable are the additional narratives of apocryphal origin and the regularly inserted commentaries, belonging to the ‘*Adversus Judaeos* literature’.¹²

The overall composite nature of the Paleja is clearly evident in the segment dealing with Genesis 28.¹³ The *Ladder of Jacob* passage is framed by the two verses from Gen. 28.5 and 29.1, with modified wording. Within this frame, one can separate two major blocks:¹⁴ the first, *LaddJac* 1.1–4.75, is a narrative section dealing with Jacob’s dream and its explanation by an *angelus interpretis*; the second,

10. C. Böttrich, ‘Palaea / Paleja. Ein byzantinisch-slavischer Beitrag zu den europäischen Historienbibeln’, in K. Schiffner, K. Wengst and W. Zager (eds.), *Fragmentarisches Wörterbuch. Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und christlichen Theologie: FS H. Balz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2007), pp. 304-13; Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs*, pp. 12-18.

11. A. Laato and J. van Ruiten (eds.), *Rewritten Bible Reconsidered* (Studies in Rewritten Bible, 1; Åbo: Åbo Akademi University; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008); J. Zsengellér and K. Gáspár (eds.), *Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes* (JSJSup, 166; Leiden: Brill, 2010).

12. Cf. in detail Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs*, pp. 40-43.

13. Concerning the structure of *LaddJac* cf. in detail Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs*, pp. 29-33.

14. The structure used in the following depends on our critical edition and new German translation (see above nn. 7 and 8); we have divided the text into four chapters (with new verse demarcations) and 15 commentaries numbered as PK (= Paleja Kommentar).

LaddJac PK 2-15, offers a series of commentaries written by the compilers of the Paleja in the thirteenth century. In addition, the first section is clearly composed of two discrete layers: the first, *LaddJac* 1.1–4.36, concentrates on Jacob’s dream and its meaning exclusively in the context of Jewish history; the second, *LaddJac* 4.37-75, continues the angel’s speech, revealing the coming redeemer Christ. The turning point between these two layers (*LaddJac* 4.36//37) is marked by a striking change of perspective: according to Gen. 28.12 and *LaddJac* 1.5, the angels on the ladder first ascend and then descend; but now in *LaddJac* 4.37, the angels descend first in analogy to ‘a man from the Most High’ coming down to reconnect the upper with the lower. A peculiar and possibly independent part of this composition is Jacob’s prayer (2.5-15), revealing all the characteristics of hymns typical in the Jewish-mystical tradition. A Hebrew parallel to this prayer has been found among the magical texts from the Cairo Genizah, constituting strong proof for the text’s existence prior to its translation into Church Slavonic.¹⁵

The entire text of the *Ladder of Jacob* therefore has at least four strata: first, a Jewish apocalyptic stratum; second, a christological expansion, third, a mystical prayer; and fourth, the incorporation into the context of the ‘Tolkovaja Paleja’ with detailed commentaries. It is not difficult to distinguish between these four strata. Each one follows its own narrative logic. There are clear cuts, breaks, seams, gaps or joints denoting the transition from one part to the other—concerning the type of text, theological interests, or narrative strategies. The commentators clearly misunderstood some issues of the narration (*LaddJac* 1.1–4.75), betraying their own distance from this old and obscure text they had found somewhere among the material already translated from Byzantine literature. Nevertheless, they are the first readers of the text of whom we know.

To determine and analyze these four different strata of course does not enable us to reconstruct supposed sources behind the recent text. Without any doubt, all the different parts of the whole segment have suffered textual and verbal corruption along their long journey. It is not simply a question of mathematical subtraction to arrive at a

15. P. Schäfer and Sh. Shaked (eds.), *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza II* (TSAJ, 64; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1997)—Prayer of Jacob: pp. 31-32 (Hebrew), pp. 50-51 (German).

postulated ‘original’. All those who used, reworked, expanded, or updated the text have also reshaped its wording or modified its tendencies. Thus we have to be cautious when it comes to making far-reaching conclusions and detailed assertions. Be that as it may, the distinct character of the denoted blocks can be considered certain. The sources behind them are accessible by working backwards along the path later redactors have paved, but we may only catch sight of their general profile or intention.

In some cases, textual corruptions are obvious and potentially resolvable. For example, cacography in the angel’s address to Jacob, as a result of which the patriarch is addressed by the senseless name ‘Ken’luz’ (*LaddJac* 3.10-11), discloses a Greek *Vorlage* recounting Jacob’s struggle at the ford of the River Jabbok (Gen. 32).¹⁶ In addition, the original conclusion of the narrative after the angel’s speech has been lost and replaced by the christological expansion (*LaddJac* 4.37-75). The mystical prayer (*LaddJac* 2.5-15) features so many concepts and terms known primarily from Hekhalot texts as well as from Greek Helios piety that we are forced to read it against a background different from the other layers.¹⁷

The *Ladder of Jacob* comprises not only the first apocalyptic section. We should regard the whole segment as a unit, including several sources and traditions. In addition, the later elements are of heuristic value for the earlier strata.

3. A Sequence of Theological Updates

Working with the entirety of the extant version, the *Ladder of Jacob* appears to be both a Jewish and a Christian text. Clearly Jewish elements include the apocalyptic section (*LaddJac* 1.1–4.36) and, from a much later time, Jacob’s mystical prayer (*LaddJac* 2.5-15). Christian contributions can be found, first of all, in the christological expansion of the angel’s speech (*LaddJac* 4.37-75), in the compiler’s polemical commentaries (*LaddJac* PK 1-15), in the framing verses (*LaddJac* A 1-3 / B), and in the redactional work on the text as a whole.

16. Cf. in detail Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs*, pp. 142-45.

17. R. Leicht, ‘Qedushah and Prayer to Helios: A New Hebrew Version of an Apocryphal Prayer of Jacob’, *JSQ* 6 (1999), pp. 140-76.

Jacob the patriarch is a central figure for both Jews and Christians.¹⁸ For the Jewish self-understanding, Jacob is the ancestor of the people bearing his honorific name 'Israel'. From his sons the twelve tribes arise, multiply, and increase to form a great nation. In Jacob's programmatic life, the blessing of God formerly given to Abraham (Gen. 18.18; 22.18) is renewed and actualized (Gen. 28.14). It now becomes clear what it means to be a 'chosen people'. For this reason the short apocalypse (*LaddJac* 1.1–4.36) has honoured Jacob the visionary from Genesis 28 with being also the revealer of Israel's coming fate. The long course of history is already seen by the patriarch; its meaning is explained to him by an *angelus interpres*. For Christians, such a text must have been highly welcome. Their self-understanding is rooted fundamentally in Jesus Christ, who intended to gather the 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15.24) with the help of the symbolically chosen 'twelve apostles'. As a true child of Israel, he fulfilled prophetic predictions, including prominent ones such as Balaam's oracle, according to which Israel awaits a 'star out of Jacob' (Num. 24.17). Accordingly, it can be readily understood why a Christian reading of the Old Testament would, in addition, seek the redeemer Christ in that key scene of Genesis 28. The story of Christ is no more than a further chapter in the history of Israel, deeply rooted already in the patriarch's vision at Bethel.

If the evaluation of *LaddJac* 1.1–4.36 as an original Jewish apocalypse from the second century CE is correct, then the basic idea of the text can be seen in God's faithfulness: after a long time of oppression Israel will finally be saved. This idea is already an update of Genesis 28, rewriting this vision in light of recent defeat and exile. Motifs from the Exodus narrative provide the colouring for this hopeful perspective. Neither the numerous enemies surrounding Israel nor the final usurper surpassing them all will have the last say. The next update depends exactly on this salvation perspective. It is made by a Christian apologist (possibly from between the fourth and

18. C. Böttrich, 'The Patriarch and His Manifold Descendants: Jacob as Visionary between Jews and Christians in the Apocryphal "Ladder of Jacob"', in M. Henze, W. Adler and L. DiTommaso (eds.), *The Embroidered Bible: Studies in Biblical Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha in Honour of Michael E. Stone* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 237–49.

seventh centuries) seeking proof of Christ the redeemer in Jewish and pagan literature.¹⁹ At the time of his writing, the apologist clearly felt the need to defend the truth of Christian belief. To do so he goes back to the origin of Israel's history, extending the angel's explanation and relating it closely to another apocryphal story, the 'Narration of Afroditian'.²⁰ This latter account is read as a prediction of Christ's birth among the Persians and of the first appearance of a star leading to the newborn child (Mt. 2). This expansion, *LaddJac* 4.37-75, combines the idea of Jewish and pagan oracles pointing to Christ and tries to legitimate Christ as the redeemer of humankind.

Incorporated into the Paleja during the thirteenth century, the Jewish-Christian narrative block (*LaddJac* 1.1-4.75) becomes part of a 'Story Bible',²¹ transformed in the following into a full Christian chronograph.²² The compilers of the Paleja are mainly interested in what they understood as 'salvation history'. Jacob's vision of Israel's future as well as the coming of Christ revealed to him seem to support their own self-understanding as heirs of this history. As good orthodox Christians, they understand themselves as the new 'people of God' replacing the 'blind' Jews 'rejected' long ago. As such, their commentaries take up the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition²³ and argue against the

19. Cf. in detail Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs*, pp. 37-40.

20. A.G. Bobrov, *Apokrifičeskoe 'Skazanie Afroditiana' v literature i knižnosti Drevnej Rusi. Issledovanie i teksty* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1994); K. Heyden, *Die 'Erzählung des Aphroditian'.* *Thema und Variationen einer Legende im Spannungsfeld von Christentum und Heidentum* (STAC, 53; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

21. Concerning the term 'Historienbibel', cf. M. Gaster, *Ilchester Lectures on Greek-Slavonic Literature and its Relation to the Folklore of Europe During the Middle Ages* (London: Trübner, 1887), pp. 147-208 (The Bible Historiale).

22. This is also the topic of a conference held in Greifswald end of September 2017: 'From Story Bibles (Historienbibeln) to World Chronicles. The Byzantine-Slavic Palaea / Paleja'. All contributions will be published in 2020 in the series 'Greifswalder Theologische Forschungen' (EVA, Leipzig).

23. H. Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld (1.-11. Jh.)* (EHS.T, XXIII/172; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 3rd edn, 1995); *idem*, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte (11.-13. Jh.). Mit einer Ikonographie des Judenthemas bis zum 4. Laterankonzil* (EHS.T, XXIII/335; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2nd edn, 1991); *idem*, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches Umfeld (13.-20. Jh.)* (EHS.T, XXIII/497, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994).

‘Jews’ on the basis of (supposed) Jewish texts.²⁴ The commentators continually address a fictitious Jewish opponent and try to convince him that Christ is the predicted Messiah. They do this also on the basis of *LaddJac* 1.1–4.75—a text already reshaped by a Christian redactor. This kind of reading has been very influential and came to be used intensively in light of a new Russian heresy emerging during the fourteenth century, that of the so-called Judaisers.²⁵ For example, Savva, a monk from Northern Russia, wrote a long letter in 1488 to a certain Dmitrij, who was his confessant.²⁶ Assuming Dmitrij to be in diplomatic contact with Jews, Savva quotes a long passage from the *Ladder of Jacob* (as found in the Paleja), along with biblical and non-biblical proof texts, to warn him about the Jewish arguments. In Savva’s letter the *Ladder of Jacob* is regarded as offering excellent support for the truth of Orthodoxy theology, a stronghold against attacks.

4. A Shelter of an Old Apocalypse

The complex textual segment in the Tolkovaja Paleja typically referred to as the *Ladder of Jacob* has attracted biblical scholars for one main reason: the Jewish apocalypse assumed to lie behind *LaddJac* 1.1–4.36.²⁷ This began in the middle of the nineteenth century, when

24. The genre was already adapted in Slavonic literature; cf. A. Pereswetoff-Morath, *A Grin without a Cat. I: Adversus Judaeos Texts in the Literature of Medieval Russia (988–1504); II: Jews and Christians in Medieval Russia—Assessing the Sources* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2002).

25. See E. Hösch, *Orthodoxie und Häresie im alten Rußland* (Schriften zur Geistesgeschichte des östlichen Europa, 7; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), pp. 43-50; C. Hannick, ‘Judaisierende’, in *LMA* 5 (1991), p. 77; A. Pliguzov, ‘Polemika o novgorodskich eretikach i “Otvjet kirillovskich starcev”’, in W. Moskovich, S. Schwarzband and A. Alekseev (eds.), *FS M. Altbauer* (Jews and Slavs, 3; Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 135-55, and, in the same volume, J. Luria, ‘Istočniki po istorii “novojavivšejsja novgorodskoj eresi” (“židovstvjujuščich”’, pp. 199-223; A.I. Alekseev, ‘Židovstvjujuščie’, in *Pravoslavnaja enciklopedija* 19 (2008), pp. 185-94.

26. A.A. Belokurov, ‘Poslanie inoka Savvy na židov’ i na eretiki’, in *ČOIDR* 3 (1902), pp. I-X, 1-94; cf. in detail Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jakobs*, pp. 43-47 (the letter is partly translated idem in the appendix, pp. 259-63).

27. Cf. John J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semica, 14; Missoula: SBL, 1979).

the phenomenon of Jewish apocalypticism became a topic of research. Scholars were looking for further material in order to broaden their sources. In this context, the *Ladder of Jacob* was joyfully greeted as a rare and precious document of early Jewish history and theology. At the same time, however, the complicated textual situation proved a hindrance in profiting more from it.

In recent times the situation has changed. Reading the entire segment, we also get a much clearer picture of the apocalyptic section. The text, corrupted in many cases and often reworked, wears a Christian garment. We cannot say how little or far its wording has strayed from the supposed original—aside from the Slavonic translation, no other version exists; only a Hebrew parallel of Jacob's prayer in *LaddJac* 2.5-15 has been found. The original ending of the Jewish apocalypse (possibly after 4.36) was cut off by the Christian redactor writing the Christological expansion. Nevertheless, the narrative logic of this apocalyptic section offers a clear conception, despite all corruptions: Israel's progenitor receives a revelation concerning the fate of his descendants at an important turning point in his own life. He learns that the oppression of the future Israel will lead to a final salvation, that 'Edom and all the Moabitic peoples' will perish—but that the chosen people will return home, will re-establish the temple cult, and live in peace.

All identifiable details in this conception can best be explained assuming a date in the middle of the second century CE—in, or shortly after, the time of the emperor Hadrian (117–138).²⁸ It was a situation of exile, slavery, loss of cultic life, and oppression by an usurper king worse than all before him. If correct, the *Ladder of Jacob* would indeed be an exciting document from a time about which we do not have many comparable sources. With all necessary caution, this short text provides one more piece for the jigsaw that is Jewish history during an important transition period. It becomes a witness for both Jewish apocalypticism and Christian apologetics because of a common interest in the figure of Jacob the patriarch. The *Ladder of Jacob* is worthy of renewed study by all means on this new textual basis.

28. Cf. in detail Böttrich, Fahl and Fahl, *Leiter Jacobs*, pp. 81-84; C. Böttrich, 'The Historical Setting of the Apocryphal "Ladder of Jacob"', in F. Badalanova-Geller (ed.), *The Enoch Chronotope* (Berlin, forthcoming).

The Tolkovaja Paleja has provided this little apocalypse shelter—at the price, of course, of its reshaping, corruption and instrumentalization. Nevertheless, it has remained a perceptible Jewish text, hidden in a much later composition.

4. Prospect

Texts like the *Ladder of Jacob* are of special value for our knowledge of Christian–Jewish relations down through the centuries. It is much more relevant to look for the intertextual and intercultural relations as reflected in the text as opposed to trying to separate out its original components. Jacob the patriarch is a symbolic figure for both Jews and Christians acting on his authority. As such, this text represents an important source for further biblical, Judaic, patristic, and Slavic studies, and constitutes fine testimony of the complexity of Slavonic Pseudepigrapha.