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An Attempt to Interpret the Patriarch Jacob's Dream (Genesis 28:10–22) in Light of Viktor E. Frankl's Existential Analysis

Próba interpretacji snu patriarchy Jakuba (Rdz 28,10–22) w świetle założeń analizy egzystencjalnej Viktora E. Frankla

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Abstract: Many exegetical and theological interpretations have been proposed for the patriarch Jacob's dream described in Genesis 28:10–22. Adapting a psychological perspective, this article analyzes the dream through the lens of Viktor E. Frankl's existential analysis, the foundation of logotherapy, a psychotherapeutic approach aimed at helping individuals find meaning in life. The elements of Jacob's dream are interpreted in the context of his social, religious, and family environment. It is concluded that the dream marks the beginning of Jacob's inner reconciliation with himself and his own life story, as reflected in the subsequent biblical account of his life.

Keywords: Viktor Frankl, existential analysis, Jacob's dream, daydream, Genesis 28:10–22

Abstrakt: Dla snu patriarchy Jakuba opisanego w Rdz 28,10–22 proponowano już wiele interpretacji egzegetyczno-teologicznych. Pozostając jednak przy typowo psychologicznym podejściu do marzenia sennego, którego doświadcza Jakub, autor niniejszego artykułu dokonał próby analizy tego snu w kontekście założeń analizy egzystencjalnej zaproponowanej przez Viktora E. Frankla, twórcy logoterapii — podejścia psychoterapeutycznego, którego celem jest odnalezienie sensu w życiu przez człowieka. Interpretacja poszczególnych elementów snu Jakuba stała się możliwa przy uwzględnieniu zarówno kontekstu społecznego, jak i religijnego, a także środowiska rodzinnego, w którym żył patriarcha. Ostatecznie uznano, że marzenie senne, którego doświadczył Jakub, należy uznać za początek wewnętrznego pojednania bohatera ze sobą oraz z własną historią życia, co widoczne jest w dalszej biblijnej relacji o życiu tego patriarchy.

Słowa kluczowe: Viktor Frankl, analiza egzystencjalna, sen Jakuba, marzenie senne, Rdz 28,10–22

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Introduction

Viktor Emil Frankl (1905–1997), now recognized as one of the leading figures in existential psychotherapy, is primarily known as the founder of the third Viennese school of psychotherapy—logotherapy and existential analysis. This approach seeks to help individuals discover meaning in human life. Frankl laid the foundations for his theory in several writings, including those based on his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, where he fought daily to preserve a sense of purpose. His most famous book, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), became a global bestseller. In 1947, Frankl expanded a lecture delivered in Vienna shortly after the war and published it as *Der unbewusste Gott*. This work was translated into English in 1975 under the title *The Unconscious God* and later published, together with another lecture from 1985, as *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning.* Although Frankl received part of his psychological and psychiatric training within the Freudian tradition, he moved beyond its basic assumptions, integrating elements of existential philosophy. In his view, psychoanalysis enables individuals to become aware of their instinctual drives, while existential analysis or logotherapy leads them to a deeper awareness of their spiritual existence.[2] Frankl's core goal was to care for human mental health, which he believed could only be achieved through a holistic view of the human person, encompassing not only the physical and psychological, but also the spiritual—or noetic—dimension. In *The Unconscious God*, he observed:

> Incidentally, my definition of religion is paralleled by another one which was presented by Albert Einstein (1950) and reads as follows: 'To be religious is to have found an answer to the question, What is the meaning of life?' And there is still another definition which was offered by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1960) and reads as follows: 'To believe in God is to see that life has a meaning'. As you see, Einstein, the physicist, and Wittgenstein, the philosopher, as well as I myself as a psychiatrist, arrived at definitions of religion that are overlapping one another.[3]

In this spirit, Frankl developed reflections on the spiritual unconscious, unconscious religiosity, the existential and transcendent analysis of conscience, and the existential analysis of dreams. It is this latter theme—existential analysis of dreams—that forms the focus of the present study.

The aim of this article is to present the principles of dream interpretation in the context of existential analysis, and ultimately, to interpret the biblical dream

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[2] V.E. Frankl, *Bóg ukryty. Człowiek w poszukiwaniu ostatecznego sensu*, 2nd ed., tłum. A. Wolnicka, Warszawa 2019, p. 42; cf. id., *Nieuświadomiony Bóg*, tłum. B. Chwedeńczuk, Warszawa 1978, p. 13.

[3] Id., *Bóg ukryty…*, p. 192.

of Jacob in Bethel (Gen 28:10–22) from this perspective. The dream account in Genesis 28 has already been examined through the psychoanalytic framework of Sigmund Freud and the depth-psychological perspective inspired by Carl G. Jung.[4] Yet an existential analysis of Jacob's dream appears equally essential, especially since Frankl's reflections often stand in dialogue with, and at times in opposition to, Freud, whose theories he knew well. The interpretation attempted here is based on principles developed by Frankl—although Frankl himself, while recognizing the significance of dreams for understanding human experience, devoted relatively little direct attention to them in his works. Such an existential approach to Jacob's dream must first take into account both the patriarch's life context and the wider understanding of dreams within Near Eastern culture, which will be discussed below. For the purposes of this study Jacob's dream as narrated in Gen 28:10–22 is treated as a genuine dream experience, reliably transmitted by the biblical author.[5]

Dreams in the Context of Psychoanalysis and Existential Analysis

Viktor Frankl proposes an existential approach to dreams grounded in the concept of the *spiritual unconscious*, which reinterprets Freud's theory of the unconscious. For Freud, the unconscious is a dimension of the *psyche* rooted in instinctual drives and inaccessible to direct introspection.[6] Frankl, by contrast, asserts that '[…] there is not only an instinctual unconscious but a spiritual unconscious as well. Thus, the content of the unconscious has been differentiated into unconscious instinctuality and unconscious spirituality.'[7] In existential analysis, it is therefore crucial to understand the respective roles of the *superego* and of *conscience*. Conscience is regarded as the organ of meaning in human life, while the *superego* represents a set of internalized norms and prohibitions. The repression of either, especially when linked to the avoidance of responsibility,

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[4] S. Schept, *Jacob's Dream of a Ladder: Freudian and Jungian Perspectives*, 'Psychological Perspectives' 50 (2007), pp. 114–121.

[5] The author's approach to the biblical text is primarily synchronic rather than historical-critical. The narrative concerning Jacob's life may represent a compilation of various traditions and need not reflect the historical biography of the patriarch. Nevertheless, in this study, the diachronic dimension has been deliberately omitted, and the event is treated as factual within the framework of interpretation.

[6] D. Westen, *The Scientific Status of Unconscious Processes: Is Freud Really Dead?*, 'Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association' 47 (1999), pp. 1064–1071.

[7] V.E. Frankl, *Bóg ukryty…*, p. 43; cf. id., *Nieuświadomiony Bóg*, p. 14; id., *Die Psychotherapie in der Praxis*, 4th ed., München 1997, p. 199.

has consequences for human existence.[8] It is paramount to note that Freud denied the possibility of genuine spiritual experience, interpreting religion instead as a product of trauma—most explicitly in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), where he traced its origin to the mythic killing of the primal father, projected onto the figure of Moses.[9] Frankl, however, takes a different stance. He argues that the spiritual unconscious is intrinsically related to religiosity, whereby a person encounters a God who has not yet been consciously recognized. In formulating this view, Frankl drew on Martin Buber, who rejected Freud's reduction of God to a mere projection of the unconscious. For Buber, the denial of God by the 'Western intellect' had led to a loss of the very language needed to speak about Him. This gives rise to the notion of the u n c o n s c i o u s or h i d d e n God—unperceived by human awareness yet still present, thus fostering unconscious relationship with the divine.[10]

According to Frankl, the existence of the spiritual unconscious can be demonstrated in two ways: (1) through phenomenological description and (2) through dream analysis. Since the first is not directly relevant to this article, the discussion here will focus on the second. Dreams already held significance for Freud, who regarded them as representations of unfulfilled childhood desires, particularly those related to libidinal fixation. In his view, repressed psychic energy often manifested in sexual or sexual-aggressive forms.[11] Frankl likewise acknowledged the importance of dreams for understanding the human person, agreeing with Freud on their significance, but diverging from him in interpretation. While Freud focused on instinctual analysis, Frankl emphasized the need to incorporate moral and intellectual aspects into the interpretation.

For Frankl, dreams reveal a person's capacity for moral self-reflection. Their symbolic content—the elements and figures that appear within them—may at times arise from internal religious experiences, even when these remain unrecognized by the dreamer.[12] As he observed: 'The phenomena of the spiritual un-

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[8] Cf. P. Szczukiewicz, J. Olszewski, *Podejście egzystencjalne w psychologii i psychoterapii — możliwości i ograniczenia*, 'Horyzonty Psychologii' 4 (2014), p. 111.

[9] Freud drew on the research of the German theologian and archaeologist Ernst Sellin in formulating his thesis about the murder of Moses. See M.F. Powęska, *Religiousness — Between Defence Mechanism and Consciousness: A Study Based on Sigmund Freud's 'Moses and Monotheism'*, 'Perspektywy Kultury' 45 (2024), pp. 437–440.

[10] J.M. de Carvalho, A. Moreira-Almeida, *Existential Meaning, Spiritual Unconscious and Spirituality in Viktor Frankl*, 'Journal of Religion and Health' 63 (2024), pp. 35–36; J. García-Alandete, *The Place of Religiosity and Spirituality in Frankl's Logotherapy: Distinguishing Salvific and Hygienic Objectives*, 'Journal of Religion and Health' 63 (2024), pp. 10–11.

[11] V.E. Frankl, *Die Psychotherapie…*, p. 194.

[12] According to the psychoanalyst, this conflict is resolved when the boy, due to his fear of castration, begins to identify with his father, while simultaneously distancing himself from his mother as an object of erotic love (J.M. de Carvalho, A. Moreira-Almeida, *Existential Meaning…*, p. 38).

conscious are empirical facts, and confronted with them, we wish to embrace the great virtue of psychoanalysis: objectivity.'[13] Dreams, therefore, serve as expressions of the spiritual unconscious and may embody traditions, religiosity, inherited moral and spiritual values, and personal faith.[14] Dreams make it possible for waking consciousness to bring to light aspects of personal significance that may previously have remained unrecognized or uninterpreted in daily life. A dream recalled upon waking, when carefully analyzed, can provide important insights into the self and disclose hidden motivations underlying actions and behaviors. Every element of a dream is significant: what delights or frightens the dreamer, what captures their attention, and who or what appears within it. Within the existential-phenomenological approach, human existence itself—along with its corresponding dream imagery—becomes central.[15] Clark Moustakas has formulated seven guidelines for interpreting dreams within this framework: (1) Precisely record the dream, together with all accompanying thoughts and associations; (2) Focus exclusively on the phenomena present in the dream; (3) Provide straightforward interpretations concerning the persons and beings in the dream; (4) Avoid speculation or presumed meanings not directly supported by the dream content; (5) Interpret the dream in light of the dreamer's own intuition, imagination, and experience; (6) Relate the dream content to the dreamer's actual life; (7) Discover the dream's meaning within the context of the dreamer's fears, interests, desires, needs, and conflicting values.[16] These principles of existential dream analysis, as proposed by Moustakas, will serve as a methodological basis for the interpretation of Jacob's biblical dream in the following sections.

The Life Context of Jacob as the Background to Dream Interpretation

An objective attempt to interpret the dream of the patriarch Jacob—in accordance with the principles of existential analysis outlined above—is only possible when considered against the backdrop of the patriarch's prior life experiences. Therefore, it is appropriate to first present the key events that preceded the dream described in Genesis 28.

The Jacob narrative begins in Gen 25:19, where the biblical text introduces the descendants of Isaac, the son of Abraham. According to Gen 25:20–21, Isaac married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, at the age of forty. For many years, she remained barren, but following Isaac's prolonged prayer, she conceived and

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[13] V.E. Frankl, *Bóg ukryty…*, p. 62; cf. id., *Nieuświadomiony Bóg*, p. 35.

[14] J.M. de Carvalho, A. Moreira-Almeida, *Existential Meaning…*, pp. 38–39.

[15] C. Moustakas, *Existential Psychotherapy and the Interpretation of Dreams*, Northvale, NJ–New Jersey, NJ–London 1994, p. 4.

[16] Ibid., p. 129.

eventually bore children after twenty years of marriage (Gen 25:21). In considering Isaac, Jacob's father, attention must also be given to his traumatic experience on Mount Moriah, where God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen 22:1–18). Peter Levine has argued that such an event could have left Isaac with a lasting sense of overwhelming fear and helplessness.[17] Similarly, June Dickie observes: 'In Isaac's case, we are not sure that Abraham explained afterwards why he had bound his son on the altar; and if he did, that could complicate Isaac's ability to trust God and relate to God.'[18] Within Genesis, Isaac is often portrayed as a passive or hesitant patriarch, particularly in later episodes. Such a portrayal may suggest that his formative experiences contributed to his uncertainty about God's protection of him and his family (cf. Gen 26:6,24). Furthermore, the biblical narrative suggests a distinction in parental attitudes toward their sons.[19] The biblical author emphasizes that Esau stayed in his father's tent, while Jacob stayed in Rebekah's, which may have intensified the rivalry between the brothers and indicates that Jacob may not have enjoyed a close relationship with his father. Gen 25:28 states that Isaac favored Esau because he enjoyed the game brought by him, whereas Jacob was loved by Rebekah. Within the narrative, Rebekah emerges as an active and decisive figure: she instructs Jacob on how to obtain Isaac's blessing (Gen 27:5–17) and orchestrates the deception of her husband. Such actions portray her as a strong and influential presence within the household, able to direct events and exert significant authority over other family members.[20]

Jacob himself seems to mirror certain aspects of his father Isaac's behavior. Moshe Reiss observes that Jacob was a more passive child than Esau, easier to manage and perhaps less demanding.[21] According to Reiss, Jacob may have been strongly influenced by his mother's dominant personality, which shaped his development and may have contributed to tendencies toward withdrawal and fear. Nevertheless, in adulthood, Jacob's behavior also reveals a calculating side, distinguishing him from his father.[22] In Gen 25:29–34, Jacob secures Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew. Later, in Gen 27, the biblical narrative recounts how Jacob—with Rebekah's help—deceitfully receives Isaac's blessing

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[17] P.A. Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*, Berkeley 2010, pp. 48–50.

[18] J.F. Dickie, *Psychological Forces and Spiritual Encounters: The Bruising and Breakthrough of Jacob*, 'Old Testament Essays' 35 (2022), p. 177.

[19] M. Reiss, *Esau, Son of Isaac and Grandson of Abraham: The Model of a Faithful Son*, 'The Asbury Journal' 69 (2014), pp. 150–151.

[20] On the strong personality of Rebekah, see: J.F. Dickie, *Psychological Forces…*, pp. 180–183.

[21] 'Jacob was a more passive child, easier to handle and perhaps to nurse' (M. Reiss, *Esau…*, p. 150).

[22] J.F. Dickie, *Psychological Forces…*, pp. 182–186.

intended for Esau. These events significantly intensify the conflict between the brothers and provoke Esau's hatred toward Jacob, culminating in Esau's plans to kill him (Gen 27:41). This threat, conveyed to Jacob by his mother, becomes the immediate reason for his departure from Beer-Sheba and his journey to Haran to escape Esau's wrath (Gen 28:1–5). It is on this journey to the house of his uncle Laban that Jacob experiences his dream.[23]

The Dream in Ancient Near Eastern Tradition

Before moving on to the interpretation of Jacob's biblical dream in the context of his life experience, it is appropriate to present the cultural setting in which the patriarch lived—a culture that shaped his worldview. This context is pivotal, as it is closely tied to religious experience, which, according to Frankl, is crucial for an accurate existential analysis of a dream.

It should be noted that dreams and their interpretation have been the subject of analysis since antiquity. From a biblical perspective, both Old and New Testament authors mention dreams as part of the lived experience of the protagonists whose stories are recorded in Scripture. In the Bible, dreams are interpreted in various ways. A dream may be sent by God, through which He wishes to reveal Himself to a person. At times dreams are depicted positively, especially when associated with divine guidance, while nightmares tend to be portrayed negatively. In some texts, dreams also serve metaphorically, for example as images of transience or death. In other passages, they reflect a person's mental or emotional state (see Isa 29:8; Sir 40:6; Eccl 5:2,6; Job 7:14; Ps 16:7).[24] The idea of dreams as a medium of divine revelation—particularly in relation to psychological or existential experience—can also be understood against the broader background of Ancient Near Eastern cultures that influenced Israel's traditions. Among the Babylonians, dreams were regarded as part of their religious worldview and were often systematically interpreted through dream manuals. In Egypt, dreams were considered a means of contact with the divine and with deceased ancestors, and their interpretation often drew on wordplay and associations between dream imagery and real-life events.[25]

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[23] 'In Haran, with his uncle Laban, Jacob demonstrates great perseverance, serving him for 20 years: initially out of love for Rachel, and subsequently because of Laban's demands (Gen 29–31).

[24] L. Ryken, J.C. Wilhoit, T. Longman III, *Słownik symboliki biblijnej: Obrazy, symbole, motywy, metafory, figury stylistyczne i gatunki literackie w Piśmie Świętym*, tłum. Z. Kościuk, Warszawa 2003, pp. 901–902, 932.

[25] J. Jelito, *Wiara w sny na Wschodzie Starożytnym*, 'Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny' 8 (1955), pp. 69–84; S. Łach, *Księga Rodzaju. Wstęp — przekład z oryginału — komentarz*, Poznań 1962, pp. 599–601.

Analyzing the content of dreams in the cultures of the Ancient Near East, scholars generally distinguish three types: (1) message dreams; (2) symbolic dreams; and (3) dreams with psychological significance. In the first two types, a deity was understood to communicate with the dreamer, either by directly revealing information about the future or delivering a task to be accomplished. In symbolic dreams the meaning was not immediately evident and required interpretation, often with the help of a skilled dream interpreter. In the third category—dreams of psychological significance—divine involvement was not necessarily assumed. Rather, such dreams were understood as reflecting the dreamer's personal situation or state of mind, which in some cases was associated with broader indicators of well-being, such as social standing or prosperity, interpreted within a religious framework as signs of divine favour.[26]

Jacob's Dream: Exegetical and Existential Analysis

It is now appropriate to interpret the narrative of Jacob's dream in its literary context and then proceed to an existential analysis. The account of Jacob's dream is found in Genesis 28:10–22. Aside from the introductory note in verse 10, the passage may be divided into three main sections: (1) the dream motif (vv. 11–15), (2) Jacob's reaction to the dream (vv. 16–19), and (3) Jacob's response in light of earlier divine promises (vv. 20–22).[27] The central description of the dream occurs in verses 12–15. Commentators often observe that Jacob's dream contains elements that resemble a vision,[28] which some interpret as a real spiritual experience. For the purposes of this study, however, the visionary elements are regarded as part of the dream experience itself, rather than a distinct prophetic vision.

Gordon J. Wenham notes that dreams in the Bible are always described from the perspective of the dreamer.[29] In verse 12, the Hebrew verb *ḥālam* (חלם) is used to indicate that Jacob dreamed—the standard verb for 'to dream' in biblical Hebrew.[30] However, it can also imply different meaning such as 'to be strong,' 'to

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[26] L.A. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East: With a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book*, (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 46), Philadelphia 1956, pp. 186–190, 206–208, 230–232; cf. D.B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph* (*Genesis 37–50*), (SuppVetTest 20), Leiden 1970, pp. 90–91; F. Flannery-Dailey, *Dreamers, Scribes, and Priests: Jewish Dreams in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras*, (SuppJSJ 90), Leiden–Boston 2004, pp. 18–20.

[27] J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju*, II: *Rozdziały 11,27–36,43. Wstęp — przekład z oryginału — komentarz*, Częstochowa 2014, p. 710.

[28] Ibid., p. 713.

[29] G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Dallas, TX 1994, II, p. 221.

[30] L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J.J. Stamm, *Wielki słownik hebrajsko-polski i aramejsko-polski Starego Testamentu*, (PSB), Warszawa 2013, I, p. 304; cf. S. Bar, *A Letter That Has Not Been*

dream sexually,' or 'to restore to health'. When Jacob awakens in verse 16, the noun *šēnāh* (שנה, 'sleep') is employed.[31] The Septuagint renders verse 11 with *koimaō* (κοιμάω, 'to sleep'; elsewhere also 'to die')[32] and verse 16 with *hypnos* (ὕπνος, 'sleep').[33] From a semantic point of view, the passage describes Jacob—weary from his journey from Beersheba to Haran, falling asleep in a certain place and using a stone as support for his head.[34] The Hebrew word *maqom* (מקום, 'place') occurs four times in the passage (vv. 11, 16, 17, 19). Many commentators suggest that Jacob's resting place was associated with a cultic site,[35] although the text does not specify its location. Susan Schept notes a Jewish legend that identifies the place of Jacob's dream with Mount Moriah, where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac.[36] Within this interpretive tradition, assuming that Mount Moriah is the location of Jacob's dream, it may be understood that Jacob's dream expresses his inner desire for reconciliation with God precisely at the location where his father began his journey of misunderstanding the situation he found himself in—the one that later required deeper reflection. This refers to the experience designated in the biblical tradition as the *Akedah* (Gen 22:1–19), implying that Jacob inherits the spiritual and existential tensions of his father's experience.

In his dream, Jacob sees: (1) a ladder set upon the earth, reaching up to heaven (v. 12); (2) angels of God ascending and descending on it (v. 12); (3) YHWH standing at the top (v. 13a); and (4) a verbal message from YHWH (vv. 13b–15). These four elements will now be examined in light of existential interpretation.

(1) The ladder mentioned by the biblical author (v. 12) is referred to in the BHS by the Hebrew word *sullām* (סלם), a hapax legomenon. Some interpreters, drawing on Babylonian tradition, have suggested that this term alludes to a ziggurat—a temple structure with terraces and ascending steps leading toward a divine realm.[37] More cautiously, most lexicographers agree that the

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Read: Dreams in the Hebrew Bible, (Monographs of the Hebrew Union College 25), Cincinnati, OH 2001, pp. 10–12.

[31] L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J.J. Stamm, *Wielki słownik…*, p. 562.

[32] R. Popowski, *Wielki słownik grecko-polski Nowego Testamentu*, (PSB), Warszawa 2004, p. 341.

[33] Ibid., p. 627.

[34] J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju*, p. 712.

[35] G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 221; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, New Haven–London 2008, I, p. 218. In the time of the patriarchs, this place was a wilderness, and there is no evidence to suggest the presence of a Canaanite sanctuary on its territory where Jacob might have entered into contact with a pagan deity through an incubation dream—especially since Jacob performed no ritual that would suggest the induction of a cultic dream. S. Łach, *Księga Rodzaju…*, p. 424.

[36] S. Schept, *Jacob's Dream…*, p. 118.

[37] S. Łach, *Księga Rodzaju…*, p. 424; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis…*, pp. 219–220; S. Bar, *A Letter…*, p. 19.

word designates some kind of vertical structure,[38] with proposed meanings such as 'stepped ramp', 'stairway', or 'flight of stone steps.'[39] Regardless of its precise physical form, in Jacob's dream the *sullām* functions as a symbolic medium linking earth and heaven.[40] Thus, the image should not be understood as a literal, ladder, ramp, or stairway, but as a visionary object expressing Jacob's encounter with the divine realm.[41]

In the ladder from Jacob's dream, one can, following the thought of Gustav Jung, perceive a symbolic bridge—connecting, on the one hand, Jacob's earthly experiences, and on the other, his spiritual encounter with the divine. The *sullām* thus becomes a symbol of inner transformation taking place within Jacob.[42] In the context of the patriarch's life—his possible difficulties in relation to his father, the close but complex bond with his mother, and the conflict with Esau immediately preceding the dream, Jacob may be understood as overwhelmed by fear, anxiety, and concern for his life. The biblical narrative portrays him as unable to remain safely within his family home, and it is in this situation of exile that he encounters YHWH, whose presence later biblical tradition describes as a source of refuge: 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble' (Ps 46:1). From an existential perspective, Jacob's situation may be read as one of suffering and despair, appearing humanly unsolvable, since reconciliation with Esau still lies in the future. Drawing on Viktor Frankl's insights, such suffering calls for the discovery of meaning: an acceptance of what cannot be changed, acknowledgment of inner despair, and the conscious confrontation of doubts about life's purpose. In this light, Jacob's suffering may be seen as a trial—a test that he will endure and survive.[43] Ultimately, the 'ladder', as some commentators prefer, functions symbolically: its earthly base represents Jacob's present predicament,

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[38] J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju*, p. 714.

[39] L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, J.J. Stamm, *Wielki słownik…*, p. 710; cf. G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 221. Ellen von Walde, after a detailed etymological analysis of the Hebrew *sullām*, proposed translating the term as 'the gradient access road to a city', without specifying which city might be meant. However, she concluded that such a translation is inconsistent with the context of Genesis 28:10–22. E. von Wolde, *A Stairway to Heaven? Jacob's Dream in Genesis 28:10–22*, 'Vetus Testamentum' 69 (2019), pp. 733–735. Umberto Barcaro metaphorically compares the ladder to a musical scale, through which, in song, a person draws closer to God. U. Barcaro, *Jacob's Dream: Useful for, and Enlightened by, Current Dream Research*, 'International Journal of Dream Research' 14 (2021), p. 234.

[40] C. Houtman, *What Did Jacob See in His Dream at Bethel?*, 'Vetus Testamentum' 28 (1977), p. 340; K. Bardski, *The Motif of Jacob's Ladder* (*Gen 28:10–22*) *in the Ancient Symbolism of Western Christianity*, 'Collectanea Theologica' 90 (2020), p. 85.

[41] Y. Peleg, *Going Up and Going Down: A Key to Interpreting Jacob's Dream* (*Genesis 28:10–22*), New York–London–New Delhi 2018, p. 97.

[42] S. Schept, *Jacob's Dream…*, p. 120.

[43] V.E. Frankl, *Nieuświadomiony Bóg*, pp. 100–103.

while its connection to heaven expresses his hope for resolution to seemingly hopeless circumstances. Within this interpretation, only faith and the presence of God provide the true means of overcoming his crisis.

(2) The angels of God, or the messengers of God (מלאכי אלהים) mentioned in verse 12, can, according to biblical tradition, be understood as guardians of people residing in particular territories, as well as protectors of the land.[44] Some interpreters regard the ascending angels as allies of the patriarch's homeland, while the descending messengers are viewed as guardians of the new land to which Jacob is traveling.[45] Others suggest that the former ensure his safety during the journey to a foreign land, whereas the descending angels signify that he will return safely.[46] Yitzhak Peleg, in his study of Jacob's dream in Bethel, interprets the ascending and descending angels along the ladder (סלם) as a symbol of the future attachment of the patriarchs and their descendants to the Promised Land.[47] Ultimately, however, the angels are meant to provide God's protection to Jacob, who is leaving his homeland.

Considering Jacob's experiences and family background, the messengers of God ascending and descending the ladder may also be interpreted not primarily as guardians of Jacob's path, but as symbolic bearers of the patriarch's inner struggles and personal experiences. The biblical author first mentions the angels ascending and then descending the ladder (Gen 28:12). The ascending angels can be understood as those who carry Jacob's present difficulties before God—his unsettled relationships with his parents and brother, together with his fears and uncertainties. The descending angels, in turn, symbolize God's response to these concerns, bringing divine reassurance to the patriarch. Thus, the messengers rep-

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[44] J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju…*, p. 714; G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 222.

[45] G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 222. The reference to angels ascending and descending in Genesis 28:12 may reflect parallels with the Mesopotamian myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal. S. Bar, *A Letter…*, pp. 19–20.

[46] G.L. Haydock, *Haydock's Catholic Bible Commentary*, New York 1895, Genesis 28. Such an interpretation, however, is not consistent with the message found in *Targum Neofiti 1* to Genesis 28:12. In this passage, the targumist explains that the ascending and descending of the angels—who are observing Jacob—is the result of the testimony given by the angels who had accompanied Jacob from his father's house, bearing witness to the patriarch's righteousness (M.S. Wróbel, *Targum Neofiti 1 Księga Rodzaju. Tekst aramejski — przekład — aparat krytyczny — przypisy*, (BibAram 1), Lublin 2014, p. 267). In moral symbolism, upward movement should represent growth and improvement, while downward movement represents sinfulness and human downfall (K. Bardski, *The Motif…*, p. 85).

[47] Y. Peleg, *Going Up…*, p. 109. In a similar vein, Peleg analyzes the ascension and descent of messengers by referring to the lives of the patriarchs: 'It turns out that entry into the Land is called *aliyah* and bears a positive connotation, while leaving the Land is termed *yeridah* and bears a negative connotation' (ibid., p. 118).

resent both the communication of Jacob's troubles to God and the conveyance of God's answer to his uncertainties.

(3) The next element of the vision is the figure of Yahweh (v. 13a), described as standing either above the top of the ladder or above Jacob himself, a nuance that can be inferred from the Hebrew text (עליו). The Septuagint, however, employs a feminine pronoun (ἐπ᾽αυτής), which suggests that God is positioned at the summit of the ladder rather than directly above Jacob. In this way, God reveals Himself to the patriarch and confirms that He is the same God in whom Abraham believed and whom Isaac, Jacob's father, worships. Notably, while Jacob dreams of seeing God, the description of Yahweh's appearance is entirely omitted.

God's position at the top of the ladder conveys a sense of distance from Jacob, since the ladder connects heaven and earth. Yet the narrative emphasizes that Jacob, within his dream, perceives God as present and in some way accessible—a truth that is confirmed by the divine message that follows. The absence of any description of God's form may reflect the biblical author's reverence for the divine majesty and the broader scriptural tendency to avoid detailed portrayals of God (cf. Isa 6:1). Significantly, Jacob dreams of God standing above the summit of the ladder. This image suggests that Jacob realizes in his vision that, above all his unresolved struggles, God remains sovereign, symbolically 'above' them. In the context of Jacob's real-life danger, the dream reveals divine deliverance and becomes a source of reassurance. From an existential perspective, this scene resonates with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, which emphasizes the search for meaning, particularly in life-threatening situations. In such circumstances, the value of a meaningful life is tested and affirmed. For the existentialist, God is perceived as the ultimate source of meaning. As Karol Michalski observes,

> Difficult situations need not plunge us into crisis but—on the contrary—can strengthen our sense of meaning, because the harder life becomes, the more meaningful it becomes. Searching for and finding meaning, which includes a bond with God, helps a person live and survive even in critical and hopeless situations.[48]

Significantly, this is the same Yahweh who demanded the sacrifice of Isaac, Jacob's father. For Jacob, this may also have implied unresolved difficulties connected with his father's experience of trauma. Now, however, Yahweh reveals Himself to Jacob in a dream, an event that should understood not as a nightmare but as a profoundly positive experience. The presence of God in the patriarch's dream constitutes a turning point in Jacob's life. According to tradition, Jacob's inherited religiosity and faith in Yahweh here begin to develop

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[48] K. Michalski, *Religia jako radykalne dążenie do sensu w logoterapii Viktora E. Frankla*, 'Studia Philosophiae Christianae' 56 (2020), p. 85.

into a more personal relationship with God. Within this context, Viktor Frankl's notion of 'super-meaning' provides an illuminating parallel. Faith, in Frankl's view, is complete trust in this super-meaning. The providential God, identified with super-meaning, remains ultimately unpredictable; nevertheless, faith in super-meaning is essential for human existence. Such faith requires humility and sacrifice, yet it preserves a person from despair and hopelessness, particularly in the face of suffering.[49] Jacob's dream may thus also be interpreted as an experience of reconciliation with Yahweh. This encounter initiates a transformation in Jacob's inner disposition toward reality and begins the process of healing past wounds. This process ultimately bears fruit in the positive resolution of his conflict with Esau (Gen 32:2–24; 33:1–16) and in Jacob's inner maturation, symbolically expressed in his struggle with an angel (Gen 32:25–33).

(4) Yahweh begins His speech (vv. 14–15) with words emphasizing His presence, as indicated by the emphatic pronoun 'I'[50] and the revelation of His name (אני יהוה). In revealing Himself in this way, God not only reaffirms the promises given to Abraham, now extended to Jacob, but assures him of His continuing presence, which will guarantee the patriarch's security.[51] In the dream, Jacob hears that he will inherit the land and receive numerous descendants, hyperbolically compared to the dust of the earth. By blessing Jacob, God also assumes the role of his guardian, accompanying him during his journey to a foreign land and promising his return to the ancestral homeland.

Although the very presence of God in Jacob's dream would already suffice for a profound inner transformation, this experience is intensified by the direct divine message. The patriarch both sees and hears God, an encounter that likely left a lasting impression. The opening words—'I am Yahweh'—are of particular theological significance: the God who had revealed Himself to Abraham and Isaac now speaks His name to Jacob, assuring him of His support in the midst of difficulty. In his dream, Jacob experiences God as the ultimate orientation of human existence, which Viktor Frankl describes as the 'super-meaning'. Faith, understood as trust in this providential God, is both demanding and sustaining, requiring humility and sacrifice, yet protecting one from despair and hopelessness in the face of suffering. The portrayal of God in Jacob's dream thus resonates with Frankl's conception of a God who is merciful, just, omniscient, and provident.[52]

Jacob's response is narrated in vv. 16–17. Upon awakening, he moves from calmness to fear, a reaction typical of theophanic encounters. To underscore

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[49] V.E. Frankl, *Homo patiens*, tłum. R. Czernecki, J. Morawski, Warszawa 1984, p. 66; M. Wolicki, *Podstawowe zagadnienia analizy egzystencjalnej i logoterapii*, Sandomierz 2008, pp. 45–48.

[50] J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju…*, p. 716.

[51] C.F. Keil, F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Peabody, MA 1996, I, p. 181.

[52] W.F. Ryan, *The Notion of God*, 'Ultimate Reality and Meaning' 26 (2019), pp. 65–67. Cf. M. Wolicki, *Relacje osoby a jej samorealizacja*, Przemyśl 1999, pp. 209–211.

the importance of the place where he encountered God, Jacob names it Bethel, recognizing it as the 'house of God' and 'the gate of heaven'. For the first time in the biblical narrative, Jacob professes faith in God's presence in his life, linking that presence to the place of revelation. He understands that Yahweh, who dwells in His heavenly temple, has entered into his earthly existence through this 'gate of heaven.'[53] Jacob then repeats the content of the dream and formulates a vow: if God provides for him with the necessities of life (food and clothing) and protection on his journey, he will accept Yahweh as his God. As Janusz Lemański observes, this vow represents the fruit of Jacob's first personal encounter with God, marking the beginning of his lifelong process of 'learning' God in his experience.[54]

Conclusion

This study has interpreted the patriarch Jacob's dream in light of the assumptions of existential analysis, with particular reference to Viktor Frankl's interpretive framework. For the founder of logotherapy, dreams are manifestations of unconscious religiosity and spirituality active within the human person, which exist universally and await discovery. Such spirituality must be interpreted in its social context, which explains why the motif of the dream in biblical and extra-biblical traditions was examined above. These traditions show that already in antiquity dreams were understood as expressions of human religious needs and interpreted in relation to a deity revealing Himself to human beings. It was also necessary to recall Jacob's life context, including his family background as the son of Isaac and Rebekah. Although he was religiously and socially connected with the God of his father and grandfather, Jacob had not yet consciously experienced Yahweh's presence in his life until this mysterious dream. In line with Martin Buber's reflections cited above, God remained for Jacob an obscured and hidden presence, partly conditioned by the trauma experienced by Isaac on Mount Moriah. Nevertheless, this does not imply the absence of an unconscious relationship with God. The dream transformed Jacob's perception of reality, including its moral dimension, which, according to Frankl, constitutes an integral part of dream interpretation. This study has therefore proposed an existential interpretation of Jacob's dream of the ladder, the presence of Yahweh at its summit, and the angels ascending and descending the ladder. Alongside exegetical observations and the insights of biblical commentators, the interpretation has considered the

[53] This interpretation is possible when reference is made to Akkadian mythology. V.H. Matthews, M.W. Chavalas, J.H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, Downers Grove, IL, Gen 28:10–22; cf. G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, p. 223.

[54] J. Lemański, *Księga Rodzaju…*, p. 720.

patriarch's family and religious context. Ultimately, this dream should be viewed as a decisive turning point in Jacob's life, through which he rediscovered his relationship with Yahweh and the ancestral faith passed on by his forebears. From a youth shaped by maternal protection and calculation, Jacob grew into a man who, trusting in Yahweh as his guardian, could confront his estranged brother Esau, confess his earlier guilt, and achieve reconciliation.

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