

REFLECTIONS

THE SIXTH PALACE

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More than fifty years ago I wrote a short story called “The Sixth Palace,” which Fredrik Pohl published in *Galaxy*, the top science fiction magazine of the day. Subsequently it was reprinted in a number of anthologies and translated into three or four foreign languages, and generally it has been held in high regard by SF readers over the years. I like the story myself and have used it in several of my own collections of my work, most recently one called *To the Dark Star* (Subterranean Press, 2007).

The story begins with a quotation that is drawn, though I don’t say so in the text, from ancient Hebrew mystical literature:

Ben Azai was deemed worthy and stood at the gate of the sixth palace and saw the ethereal splendor of the pure marble plates. He opened his mouth and said twice, “Water! Water!” In the twinkling of an eye they decapitated him and threw eleven thousand iron bars at him. This shall be a sign for all generations that no one should err at the gate of the sixth palace.

—*Lesser Hekhaloth*

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From that starting point I go on to tell the tale of two soldiers of fortune who travel to a small world orbiting the star Valzar, where a fabulous treasure is known to be guarded by a gigantic robot who will admit to the treasure vault only that person who can correctly answer a series of difficult questions. Anyone who fails to give the proper answers will be immediately annihilated. It’s a classic fairy-tale plot, converted into science fiction by setting it on an alien world and using a robot instead of a dragon as the guardian of the treasure. One of the two protagonists answers seventeen of the questions correctly; but when he gives a correct answer to the eighteenth, the robot strikes him dead. The other man, pondering this sequence of events, arrives at an understanding of what has taken place and devises a stratagem that he hopes will spare him from a similar fate. And so it does; he deals shrewdly with another set of questions and the robot opens the treasure vault to him. But then, as so often happens in fairy tales—well, read the story yourself to find out how it ends.

I knew, at the time I wrote the story, that the quotation that had provided me with the basic plot situation must have come from some Jewish source: “Ben Azai” is a Hebrew name, and “Lesser Hekhaloth” sounded Hebrew to me also and was, perhaps, the name of some Kabbalistic text. But that was all I knew, back in February 1964. The story itself owes more to Zen Buddhism for its plot than Judaism, anyway. I don’t regard myself as an expert either in Zen or in Judaism, though I do know how to tell a story, and in “The Sixth Palace” I used the rabbinical anecdote to fashion a pretty good piece of SF. Who Ben Azai was and where the text of the Lesser Hekhaloth might be found, I had no idea, nor did I have any record of where I had come upon that quotation. I am of Jewish birth myself, but not particularly well versed in the arcana of the Jewish religion, and I must have stumbled across the Ben Azai story in some secondary source. Over the years I continued to wonder about Ben Azai and the Lesser Hekhaloth. Around 1975 I asked Avram Davidson, the most Orthodox of my Jewish friends, about them, but he, for all his extraordinary erudition, was unable to provide any information. And in time I came to assume I would never know.

No knowledge remains lost forever, though, especially theological knowledge, and here in the far future that is the twenty-first century we have a thing called Google that penetrates all mysteries at the click of a mouse. I suppose that at any time in the last decade I could have looked up "Hekhaloth" or "sixth palace" on my computer and found the origin of my story, but it didn't occur to me to do so. And then, one day late in 2014, there came an e-mail from Boruch Perl of Brooklyn, who has made a careful study of Jewish mystical lore. "The quote," he told me, "is from *Jewish Gnosticism: Merkabah Mystic and Talmudic Tradition*, by Gershom Scholem." It is drawn, he said, from "an extremely obscure book of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and is based on an incident recorded in the Talmud (Hagigah 1)" in which "Ben Azai gazed (at the Divine Presence) and was killed. . . ." I had heard of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), the great German-born scholar who from 1933 until his retirement in 1965 held the post of Professor of Jewish Mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Mr. Perl provided me with a link to the text of the Gershom Scholem book. I was at my computer in a flash.

Eureka!

There was the whole story, the mere edge of which I had come upon in 1964 and used as the inspiration for that tale in *Galaxy*.

The Hekhaloth Books, Scholem explained, were part of a group of Jewish mystic texts, well over a thousand years old, including, among others, the Greater Hekhaloth, the Lesser Hekhaloth, and a book called *Merkabah Rabbah*. "Hekhaloth," in Hebrew, means "palace" or "temple." It is in the Lesser Hekhaloth, says Scholem, that the famous Jewish hero Rabbi Akiva, who lived from about A.D. 40 to 135, tells the tale of his journey to heaven in the company of three fellow rabbis, Ben Zoma, Ben Avuyah, and . . . Ben Azai! They discovered as they went that the Lord God of Israel "sitteth within seven palaces, one within another. And at the entrance to each palace are eight doorkeepers, four to the right of the lintel and four to the left of the lintel. These be the names of the doorkeepers of the first palace: Lahabhiel, and Kashrael, Zekhuthiel, Tophhiel, and Lahariel, Mathkiel, and Shuwael. And there be those who say, 'And Shubhael.'"

I read on, fascinated, as the ancient text listed the names of all the doorkeepers of the inner palaces and described the complicated process by which those who would enter into the presence of the Lord God must placate them. ("When thou comest and standest at the entrance of the first palace take two seals in thy hands, one that of Totrosi'ai the Lord and one that of Surya the Prince of the Presence. Show that of Totrosi'ai the Lord to those standing to the left. . . . Straightway they seize thee, one from thy right and one from thy left until they bring thee and hand thee over to Taghriel and Mathpiel and make thy peace with them and warn them concerning thee. Now Taghriel is the prince who is the head of the entrance of the second palace and standeth to the right of the lintel, and Mathpiel is the prince who standeth to the left of the lintel with him. . . .") I must point out that although, as I said, I am Jewish by birth, I have never had any sort of religious belief, and to me these mystical figures had no more real meaning than Zeus or Odin, or, for that matter, than Tyrion Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen, or Bilbo Baggins and Aragon, Lord of the Western Lands, or the stalwart warriors of E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*. They are all characters out of fantasy fiction, to me. I realize that others do feel differently about the textual matter of their religions, and that the gatekeepers of the seven palaces may be true realities to them, whereas to me Taghriel and Mathpiel are just figures in a story, a story that somebody made up just as surely as George R.R. Martin made up the tale of the struggle for the throne of the Seven Kingdoms. I mean no offense to these people when I say that. I read on and on, wide-eyed, as excited by the Hekhalothic account of the seven palaces as I

might have been by an account of Queen Daenerys's romance with Frodo, and for just about the same reasons.

So the rabbis, obeying their instructions, present the proper seals to the proper doorkeepers, and make their way, palace after palace, to the inner realms of the Lord's dwelling. These doorkeepers are a fearsome bunch. At the sixth palace the head doorkeepers are Kazpiel and Dumiel, "whose bows are strung and stand before them, their swords are sharpened and in their hands. And lightnings flow and issue forth from the balls of their eyes, and spiderwebs of fire from their nostrils and torches of fiery coals from their mouths. . . ." We see the adventurous rabbis presenting the appropriate seals to Kazpiel, "whose sword is drawn in his hand, and there issue forth from it lightnings, and he shaketh it against everyone who is not fit to behold the King and his throne, and there is no creature who may stay his hand. And his sword crieth and saith: 'Pain!'" Some who come before him he slays at once; for the more fortunate he will "bring thee a whirlwind and seat thee in a chariot of brilliance and trumpet before thee as eight thousands of myriads of horns and three thousands of myriads of rams' horns and four thousands of myriads of bugles. . . ." Those who survive Kazpiel go next to Dumiel, another ferocious figure who stands ready to destroy anyone he deems undeserving of being passed inward to the seventh and final palace, which is Paradise, where the Lord God Himself resides.

The four rabbis meet varying fates. Rabbi Akiva tells us that he "entered safely and came out safely," though he does not tell us how he achieved this. Ben Zoma's glimpse of Paradise drives him mad. Ben Avuyah, a rabbi as famed for his scholarship as Akiva, undergoes an even more terrible metamorphosis, emerging as a heretic, a blasphemer, and a libertine, so villainous that thenceforth his name is never mentioned in sacred texts except under the euphemism, "The Other One." And poor Ben Azai, as the epigraph to my story describes, makes it as far as the gate of the sixth palace, but his outcry of "Water! Water!" at the sight of the marble walls is the fatal error that causes the doorkeeper Kazpiel to smite him with his sword. We know not why, for who can fathom the ways of the Almighty and His doorkeepers? And—here is the Zen angle to my story—I seized on the idea that the proper behavior at the gate to the sixth palace might not necessarily be what we mortals consider to be rational behavior, and from that I generated my story.

So—thanks to Boruch Perl of Brooklyn—I know at last where the strange little anecdote that long ago gave me the starting point for a story came from. I have learned once again of the power of Google, for if you run searches, as I did, for "Hekhaloth," "sixth palace," or "Gershom Scholem," you will be granted more information about the gates and their keepers than you can possibly absorb. And, finally, by making this belated attempt to find the source of my story, I came upon a remarkable mystical tale abounding in mighty figures and potent imagery ("At the door of the seventh palace stand angry all the heroes, warlike, strong, harsh, fearful, terrific, taller than mountains and sharper than peaks") which, though for some it may have true religious significance, had for me the sort of visionary force that I have found in some of the classics of heroic fantasy, or, even closer to the mark, in some of the most powerful tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*.