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Two Commentaries on JACOB'S LADDER

The following selections are taken from the journals of Sidney Keter, translator of *The Mondschein Bible* (*Das Buch der Mondschein*).

—Sy Kirschbaum, Prague 2021

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THE MONTENEGRIN EPISTLE

There are two notions of the ladder that appeared to Jacob at Beth El. The first is that God or his legion of angels built the ladder from heaven to earth as a path for Jacob to ascend. Once Jacob ascended, the path would be blazed and all of mankind could follow in his footsteps. The second interpretation is that the ladder was made by man and built from the ground up. But this ladder cannot possibly reach the heavens. It is a false and seductive path toward a phantom divine realm. In this interpretation, the ladder is nothing but a hermetic circle bound by worldly phenomena, as shown by the angels moving up and down in endless revolutions.

There is reason to believe that there is another vision of the ladder left out of the book of Genesis, one that follows the struggle between Jacob and God on the bank of the Jabbok River as Jacob waits to meet his brother, Esau, on the following day. In this account, Jacob returns to Beth El and lies down in the same spot as before, rests his head on the precise rock where he had rested it years ago. He is now called Israel, or rather he is both Jacob and Israel, a combination of two names, of two distinct beings. As soon as Jacob-Israel falls asleep,

the ladder appears above him. Instead of remaining lying down, as he had the previous time, observing and waiting, he gets up and approaches the structure that seems to dissolve into the infinite heights above him. He thinks he can glimpse the point at which the ladder disappears into a thin wisp of cloud but can't be sure if this speck is not the distant wheeling of an eagle or falcon around the entrance to the divine space, forever unable to enter it, for no bird of prey may enter it.

As Jacob-Israel puts his foot on the first rung of the ladder, he feels a strange but powerful energy begin to course through his body, as if his blood is moving faster, as if the ladder contains a fire, a burning—not one that burns Jacob-Israel, no, a burning that provides strength and a certain type of resolution for the great climb. And the climb is great. Night gives way to morning, morning to midday, then evening, then night again, and another night, and another, as Jacob-Israel climbs. Day after day he ascends the ladder, careful not to lose his balance, focusing not on the destination (how could he see it?) but always on the next rung, the next grasp or step. It could be that years pass as Jacob-Israel climbs upwards toward the seemingly unreachable goal. Despite the continuous presence of the fire or burning, his legs grow weary, his hair whitens, and his body becomes gaunt and frail. The birds of prey above him sense that he is nearing his end and soon will fall, lifeless, from the ladder, plummeting down to the earth below, where they will pick and feast on the last remains of meat still clinging to those old bones. But Jacob-Israel doesn't fall. He keeps climbing, moving upwards, now slower, now faster, until he reaches the precise point he saw from the ground, the place where the ladder seemed to pierce the wispy clouds. Moving beyond that point, Jacob-Israel discovers yet another endless rise and another distant point far above him. He becomes downcast, afraid, angry, thinking that a mischievous God has deceived him. Yet he

climbs higher and higher and longer and longer until, finally, at what feels to him the edge of death, the heavenly gates appear before him. Jacob-Israel approaches the gates. If these gates had been shut and locked, they would have been impenetrable, but they were left open and are now swinging in the high wind of the highest sky. This wind swirls around him with such ferocity that Jacob-Israel is surprised it doesn't lift him up and toss him into the abyss below. The winds seem to part around Jacob-Israel as he makes his way through the gates of heaven and into the abode of God. What he sees there shocks him. All around him lie the decomposing forms of souls, souls that had once, he assumes, ascended from the earth into the everlasting immortality promised by this divinely ordained passage, souls rewarded for having lived a good, just, Godly life. Here, they rot. And the angels! Their corpses are being torn apart by the same unforgiving wind. Piece by piece, souls and angels are disintegrating and falling into the lower regions of the clouds. Then Jacob-Israel lifts his eyes from the rotting souls and decaying corpses of angels and sees the ruins of this lifeless, empty heaven: the divine dwellings crumbling, the waterways drying up, and the light—the source of life—blotted out by the darkest storm cloud. Jacob-Israel says to himself, "I have reached heaven and have found it empty." Then he says, "God has withdrawn from here." Jacob-Israel walks through the barren territory. He surveys the entire divine kingdom, finding not a trace of spirit, nothing of the divine. Then he turns back, passes through the gates again and starts his descent down the ladder. When, after countless years, he reaches the bottom of the ladder, he raises his head from that pillow of rock and says to himself, "How awesome is this spot that sits below the ladder, which leads to that desolate space where God once reigned with all His majesty but has now abandoned. Lo, I will never forget that wasteland of wind and sorrow. God has withdrawn from there! I once defeated

God, now I have penetrated his ruined abode. Truly, God flees from the power of man."

THE BUDAPEST COMMENTARY

It is said that in Jacob's second vision of the ladder, he climbed to the gates of heaven. He passed through the open gates and saw the devastation left behind by the first withdrawal of the Lord. It is said that upon perceiving the ruins of heaven, Jacob spoke thusly, "Truly, the presence of God is absent. There is nothing left here that is divine." Jacob returned to earth, lifted his head from the stone, and continued on his way to his camp. Along the way, he met a shepherd who had come down from the hills to water his flock. The shepherd was named Bilal. "Have you heard the news?" Jacob said to the shepherd. "God has withdrawn from heaven. He no longer dwells in his abode." This is how the shepherd Bilal responded to Jacob:

"From the hilltop, I watched as you passed through the desert and the valley to the place called Beth El. There you placed your head on the stone and saw the ladder above you. The first time you did this, many years ago, you saw angels going up and down. You were fearful of the ladder's height and majesty. You didn't know that the ladder was placed there for you to climb. Indeed, I could see from the hilltop that thoughts of ascending the ladder were absent from your mind. Years later, you returned through the desert and valley. You placed your head on that same stone and again perceived the ladder. This time, you understood that it was there for you to climb. You climbed the ladder, and as you climbed you thought you were alone there, alone amid those majestic heights, while around you the limits of the dream crashed into nothingness. Had you moved even the slightest bit either to the right or to the left of the ladder, you would have come against the rough edge of God's abandoned creation, a de-

caying creation that is, at the same time, the beginning of a great disintegration, because the very moment of the infinite statement, 'Let there be light,' is also the onset of darkness. God underestimates his adversary—humankind; you, Jacob, know this better than anybody. While this adversary is inferior in every way, it still can't be defeated. The mirage of the horizon obscures the borders of creation and hides the proximity of chaos, just as the height and majesty of the ladder obscure the closeness of the divine and human realms and, therefore, the vulnerability of God. A shepherd's life requires the tracing of the horizon, the finding of borders and edges. Once the empty heaven is perceived, nothing more can be gained

by climbing. Instead, one must search for harmony or oneness in the swirling vortex of chaos and darkness, in the darkness where the winds of creation still howl in the frigid night and where the waters of the deep reign supreme. Find that very edge, Jacob, and you will learn to sing the song, the very song that will call out to God and lure him back toward the world."

Perplexed by the words of this strange shepherd, Jacob remained silent. The old man lifted his staff and continued on his way, leading his flock toward the river. Jacob glanced back in the direction of Beth El, but nothing remained of his vision. Evening was falling. Jacob, gathering his courage, embarked toward the borderlands.

Iván ARGÜELLES

FALLING ASLEEP IN ELYSIUM

to this day the sound of tires crunching over gravel
or the headlights snaking along darkened bedroom walls
in the morning the significance will fade
though they looked the same everyone was different
suspicion is the basis of all good cinema
nuances of chiaroscuro and the dialect in which it's defined
beware of ladies with high-heeled thoughts !
masses of dark wet hair unfolding over the Japanese screen
Cleopatra died the same day as my twin
but if you attach fins to the shoulder blades it will sing
the era of rhyming couplets has given way to nuclear weapons
language cannot improve nor can it halt
I thought you said nuclear weeping
before you know it the edge is gone
space has a way of being redundant and self-duplicating
the color of the sun is that of an archaic homophone
every atmosphere is equipped with three uncut hemispheres
spinning out of control planet Mercury in hemorrhage
there is no future in auto-incineration