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BOOK REVIEW

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June 1990

Roskies, David G. The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe.

Jewish Publication Society. 1989. 652 p. Sources, Biographies, Index of Selected Biblical Citations, Index. ISBN: 0-8276-0314-2. \$34.95.

The mythologies of ancients tell many tales of the wars of man and god, however, only the victor recounts his accomplishments and those of his god. The defeated are ever silent. The defeated usually disappear along with their gods, e.g., Carthage, Troy, Moab, Edom, etc. National identity in the ancient world could not recognize or tolerate defeat, either on a human or supernatural level.

Of the many contributions which Judaism has made to mankind, the primary one is the concept of one G-d, the sole creator of the universe, who can be seen to operate through human history. His rule of the world of nature is on a par with His direction of human affairs. If G-d is eternal, then His people is eternal. The question must arise regarding the mechanics of defeat and catastrophe in the history of the Jewish people. David G. Roskies has compiled sources from the Hebrew and the Yiddish spanning 3,500 years which address this problem, and he demonstrates how the answers have evolved in the course of the millennia.

From the destruction of the Temples to the Holocaust, archetype and ritual have come to embody the catastrophes of the Jewish people. The various forms of expression have allowed the collective memory of the nation to express the immediacy of the experience, keep their memory alive, and reinterpret and reinforce the unbreakable covenantal relation with G-d.

In ancient Egypt, the Merneptah Stele (ca. 1225 B.C.E.) bears the inscription: "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not." Though scholars may question which exact event is being referred to, the statement places Jewish catastrophe well back in history, close to its inception. To paraphrase Mark Twain, however, the rumors of the demise of the Jewish people have been somewhat premature. This collection of sensitive translations, aptly assembled and annotated by Professor Roskies, demonstrates the cultural results of such efforts for survival.

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