

David G. Roskies, ed.

THE LITERATURE OF DESTRUCTION; JEWISH RESPONSES TO CATASTROPHE

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Reviewed by Mordecai Roshwald

Literature is a refined and distilled response of human spirit to human experience, or what is usually referred to as reality. The reality of collective and individual martyrdom—that is to say, experience which borders on the annihilation of experience, life which is overwhelmed by death, being which meets non-

being, *l'être* which reaches *le néant*—is a special kind of reality. It leaves but little space between a cry of anguish and the ultimate silence. It is, therefore, rather amazing to confront the abundance and the variety of literary response to the experience of Jewish suffering and martyrdom through the last two and a half millennia.

The literary reaction to such persecutions, which was selected for the present bulky volume, includes biblical passages, legends, rabbinical homiletic literature, liturgy, medieval chronicles, historical accounts, proclamations and pamphlets, imaginative stories, and, above all, poetry ranging from the Bible to mid-twentieth century. The material is translated from Hebrew and Yiddish.

While all this material is of primary historical significance, it is much more difficult to evaluate it from the literary standpoint—not least, because aesthetic yardsticks pale before this kind of suffering and horror. In the context of the experience, a Crusade Chronicle (74-82)—what might be seen as a factual report, though expressed in the idiom of religious belief and tradition—is as moving as a Greek tragedy. An attempt at objective reporting of the life in the Warsaw Ghetto—subjecting the account to modern scholarly discipline by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum (386-98)—becomes history in the making worthy of a Thucydides, who fortunately did not experience such depths of degradation and calamity. The short stories include some with naturalistic approach, such as Lamed Shapiro's "The Cross" (193-202), which almost makes Zola's *Germinal* read like an idyll, and, surprisingly, humorous accounts of Sholom Aleichem (189-93) where the tragedy lurks behind the laughter. Most impressive are the poetic responses from antiquity to date.

To address the thematic side, the reaction to collective affliction first follows a certain theological-philosophical pattern, which is revealed in the stern passages of Deuteronomy (16-18): If Israel sins, God's terrible punishment will follow. Thus, suffering being the consequence of sin, morality and divinity remain intact, even if Israel is tormented. Eventually, as Israel mended its ways, and still was persecuted—whether by the Romans, or Crusaders, or Cossacks, etc.—the moral-theological formula came under strain, and outcries against the divine silence or even iniquity made their appearance. While these can be found even in the Bible (though not in the selection in the present volume), they become more prominent in rabbinical literature and quite emphatic in some of the modern letters. Indeed, the original philosophy is often discarded as an empty shell.

When this happens, the reaction to suffering is broken up into several variants. One, the most heroic, asserts commitment to Judaism as a way of life and a code of moral conduct, come what may. Thus, in a story of Ibn Verga, an exile from Spain, afflicted with the loss of his entire family, exclaims to God that all He did will not deter His victim from remaining a Jew (98). Another reaction is simply asserting the suffering—with anguish and despair—without any recourse to consolation or self-assertion. There is an abundance of it in the literature of the Holocaust. Still another response is the suggestion of a total demoralization involved in cruel persecution, when the martyr becomes a monster like his persecutor, as in the story of Lamed Shapiro mentioned above. Another reaction is a call to resistance as a way to salvation and redemption, at least in the national-collective sense. This stance blends with and is implicit in

modern political Zionism, and resounds in some of the poetry written in the Vilna and Warsaw ghettos (483-90). Thus, man looks for a ray of hope in the valley of the shadow of death.

The editor of the present volume, Professor David Roskies, has not merely selected and collected the material, but annotated it with references to early sources--a significant help to the student of this literature. He also provided introductions to the twenty chapters into which this book is divided.

The present reviewer does not always agree with the tenor of Professor Roskies's comments, such as his implicit criticism of the reluctance of the Talmudic rabbis to promote the martyrological tradition. It rather indicates that they were concerned with promoting the sane aspects of reality, above and beyond preoccupation with suffering and the mental and literary response to it.

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