

Sacred and Profane

RABBINIC FANTASIES: IMAGINATIVE NARRATIVES FROM CLASSICAL HEBREW LITERATURE. Edited by DAVID STERN and MARK JAY MIRSKY. *Jewish Publication Society*. 364 pp. \$27.50.

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THE movement to modernize Jewish culture, which goes back roughly to the 18th century, has always proceeded on parallel lines. Along with the radical impulse to uproot and supplant the classical forms of Jewish self-expression—legal debate, synagogue sermons and poetry, sacred tales and lives—there were attempts from the beginning to repackage the past and thus not to scrap but to change the system from within. Early advocates of the Enlightenment in Jewish Eastern Europe, even while attacking the religious establishment head-on through parody, satire, and programs for social and educational reform, also composed sermonic tracts, Bible commentaries, letter-writing manuals, and almanacs for a new, enlightened age. Indeed, the pantheon of modern Jewish culture is occupied precisely by those writers, artists, and intellectuals who found creative ways to destroy and to rebuild at one and the same time. In Yiddish, Mendele Mokher Seforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz; in Hebrew, Hayim Nahman Bialik, M.Y. Berdyczewski, and S.Y. Ag-

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non managed not only to reverse cultural priorities but to do so in the name of tradition itself.

Perhaps the most effective strategy adopted by these radical traditionalists was the selective retrieval and editing of traditional narratives. Early in the century Bialik, aided by his colleague Eliezer Ravnitsky, assembled the disparate legends and bold biblical retellings scattered about the Talmud and midrashim into a *Book of Jewish Lore* (*Sefer ha-Aggadah*). Consistent with Bialik's bravado, this book, published first in Hebrew and later in Yiddish, was designed to stand for the source: to become a definitive reading and folk encyclopedia of the rabbinic imagination. In Berlin, meanwhile, the ever-rebellious Berdyczewski, whose Hebrew pen-name was M.Y. Bin Gurion, was hard at work on a Hebrew and German edition of medieval Jewish legends that stressed the great diversity and underground heresy of the folk. His crowning achievement was *Mimekor Yisrael*, a multilayered compendium of post-biblical Jewish lore and demonology.* Here in America, the anthologizing impulse took on a decidedly academic slant when Louis Ginzberg "retold" the oral traditions of the Bible in one sequential narrative, then appended a magnificent scholarly apparatus to these *Legends of the Jews* (1909-38).

Rabbinic Fantasies borrows something from each of these modern "inventions of tradition," though without much self-awareness. Like Berdyczewski, David Stern and Mark Mirsky want to expose the zany, irreverent, sexually explicit side of "normative" Judaism within a changing historical and geographical landscape. But like Bialik and Ravnitsky, they somehow believe that this countertradition is really "rabbinic"—hence their title. Like Ginzberg, they respect the achievements of Jewish scholarship and aim to present a carefully

* This work was published in English in a three-volume set in 1976 and is newly available in an abridged and annotated edition prepared by the late Emanuel Bin Gurion and by Dan Ben-Amos, Indiana University Press, 512 pp., \$57.50.

edited and fully annotated text. (In some cases, as with Martha Himelfarb's rendering of *Sefer Zerubabel*, or Stern's own translation of "The Legend of the Ten Martyrs," the English is the best available version in any language.) Driven by these disparate agendas, the editors have combined mainstream Jewish faith-narratives under a single banner with highbrow literary experiments that were never meant for plebeian consumption. Though it

makes for an attractive package, what is rabbinic in their anthology turns out upon closer inspection not to be fantastical, and vice versa.

Like "literature," "liturgy," and "history," fantasy is another of those Hellenistic terms that can be applied to classical Judaism only with great effort. Stern admits as much in his introduction but then draws a firm line between "true histories," which have been excluded, and the "imaginative fic-

tions" here brought together for the first time. If we allow, for argument's sake, that premodern Jews had a concept of "history," then "The Legend of the Ten Martyrs" would surely rank on top of the list. Jews most certainly believed—despite contradictory evidence in the Talmud itself—that these ten rabbis were martyred together during the Hadrianic persecutions just as they believed that one of them, Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest, attempted to avert the evil by ascending to heaven to plead the Jewish cause. How else could this mini-epic have entered the high point of the Yom Kippur liturgy (albeit in poetic form)? Or take the "Two Narratives About God," translated by Stern from the Midrash on Lamentations. When, in July 1942, Rabbi Kalonymus Shapiro of Warsaw invoked the striking image of God weeping over the destruction of the Temple as it appears in that Midrash, it was to prepare his flock for the imminent destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, not to entertain them with flights of rabbinic fancy. Jews lived and died by these "fantastical" texts. Where then does imagination end and history begin?

Just as the imaginative status of some of these narratives is open to question, so is the rabbinic provenance of others that might indeed qualify as fantasies. The case that Stern and Mirsky make, despite their title, is that Hebrew literary creativity was never limited to authorized rabbinic circles. Popular folklore, esoteric traditions, and courtly entertainments flourished both above and below ground throughout the 1,700 years documented by this volume. Some works, like the extremely naughty "Alphabet of Ben Sira," enjoyed a kind of monastic notoriety of the sort celebrated by Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose*. Others, like the learned satires in rhymed prose by Solomon Ibn Saqbel (12th century?) and Judah Ibn Shabbetai (1168-ca. 1225) were hardly known outside the courts of medieval Spain. Because of widespread Jewish literacy, however, and universal access to Scripture, the Jewish imagination obeyed no class or clerical distinctions.

It is Scripture, in the end, that holds all these texts together. The measure of their greatness is not the degree to which they defy the strictness of biblical monotheism or deviate from the precise wording of the Hebrew Bible, but the way in which Scripture becomes the warp and woof of every image, episode, and phrase. Scripture so thoroughly pervades this book that direct quotations are identified by the editors *in situ*, allusions are explicated in the notes, and archaic diction is used throughout to convey the biblicalized style. Indeed, probably no other anthology offers the English reader such a fluent but at the same time scripturally responsible rendering of classical Hebrew literature.

MODERN Jewish rebels and reformers discovered a powerful formula for cultural renewal that the editors and translators of this anthology demonstrate as well. The lasting revolutions in Jewish consciousness take place not by invention but by reinvention. Through subtle shifts in emphasis, the mixing of the sacred and profane, through reappropriations of biblical words, phrases, and prophecies, it is possible to read the inscrutable present in the light of the revealed past. With sufficient knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language, it is even possible to rewrite that past in the light of the present.