

Jewish Legends of Three Thousand Years.

Wayne State University Press. Paperback edition. 1988. (First Edition 1979). 426 p. Appendices. Chronological List of Sources. Abbreviations and Annotated Bibliography. Index. ISBN: 0-8143-1850-9. \$15.95, pb.

After a rather heavy reading diet of books about religions which are directed at either believers or non-believers and seek to somehow change their beliefs, *The Messiah Texts* is something of a relief. While, of course, the book is about a rather central tenet of traditional Jewish belief, Patai is not trying to convert anyone. He has collected Jewish tales, myths and legends about the expected coming of the Messiah from the Bible and later sources, almost up to the present. After an extended introduction in which he explores the history of ideas of the Messiah and the psychological role that belief in the coming of the Messiah has played for dispersed Jews, Patai simply presents the texts that he has collected, and often translated himself, with just enough comment to explain the focus of the next section of texts.

Some readers may find difficulty in the identification of central religious stories as myths or legends, but Patai takes care to explain how he means the word "myth." Christians may be surprised to find that the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah in Isaiah, which they have understood to foretell the birth, life and death of Jesus, are but among the earliest of a long series of Jewish Messiah myths, most with the same essential elements. Except for inclusion of a fourteenth century document making a case that Jesus was not the awaited Messiah, Patai does not deal with differing Christian and Jewish views on this subject. *The Messiah Texts* is recommended as a respectful supplement to theologically-oriented reading on religion.

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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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