




1992

Introduction

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Introduction

Abstract

The Jews are a people whose historical roots are in the ancient land of Israel. In this country their Hebrew language initially developed, and their oral traditions, in prose and poetry, entered into their canonized holy scriptures and subsequent religious, judicial, and literary textual compilations that gained central position in Jewish life throughout history. Together with the Bible, these works, the Mishnah, the midrashic collections, and the Talmuds, the Jerusalem as well as the Babylonian, served as the foundations for their narrative traditions that developed when the Jews were in exile, diffused among other peoples.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

Comments

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Jewish Folktales

Introduction

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The Jews are a people whose historical roots are in the ancient Land of Israel. In this country their Hebrew language initially developed, and their oral traditions, in prose and poetry, entered into their canonized holy scriptures and subsequent religious, judicial, and literary textual compilations that gained central position in Jewish life throughout history. Together with the Bible, these works, the Mishnah, the midrashic collections, and the Talmuds, the Jerusalem as well as the Babylonian, served as the foundations for their narrative traditions that developed when the Jews were in exile, diffused among other peoples. The dispersion of the Jews began as early as the eighth century B.C.E. and progressed, both in continuous population movements and in traumatic expulsions that followed wars and defeats. Early Jewish communities outside the Land of Israel formed in neighboring Near Eastern countries, expanding later to the entire shore of the Mediterranean, and then inland to central, western, and eastern Europe.

The historical, social and cultural manifestations of the exile experience — living as an ethnic minority among other peoples — had a major part in the shaping of Jewish narrative traditions. These traditions were forged by two contrasting tendencies of localization and general Jewish orientation. The first tendency manifested itself in the emergence of a distinct regional Jewish language, the development of community histories, revolving around known locales, events and figures, and the influence of local traditions upon the Jewish narrative repertoires. The second tendency involved a common conception of Jewish national history, the maintenance of Hebrew as a valued language, and the interdependence between Jewish literate and oral cultural heritage. These two tendencies complemented each other in the formation of Jewish narrative traditions. Local impact in terms of language, themes and personalities, influenced the formation of narratives in particular communities and, at the same time, the inter Jewish community relations effected the diffusion of themes and narratives among the Jews in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

In the twentieth century the Jewish world went through traumatic changes that effected the social and cultural base of its narratives. The annihilation of European Jewry, the deprivation of the remaining Jews in East Europe from their language and culture, the uprooting of Jewish communities in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean countries and their immigration to Israel, and the general revolution in communication and entertainment that the twentieth century has witnessed, though not equivalent in any other way, are all factors that reduced or altered storytelling in Jewish societies.

Even before these radical transformations of traditional Jewish societies took place, serious scholarship on Jewish folk-narratives had begun. Initially, medieval manuscripts, and later popular books, rather than oral traditions, served as

the primary source for this research, but later the recording of narratives told orally became a focus of study. With the establishment of the State of Israel, and the influx of immigrants to its borders the study of Jewish folk narrative tradition took a quantum leap. The Israel Folktale Archives, founded by Dov Noy in 1955 and now housed at the University of Haifa, Israel, provides a central depository for narratives. The research on Jewish manuscripts and popular books in different Jewish languages has continued and brought about the discovery of new works and the systematic understanding of previously known texts. The presentation of these storytelling traditions takes a linguistic historical approach by focusing upon folk narratives in different Jewish languages as they are available from different periods. The study of the narratives of some Jewish language communities, like Judeo-Persian¹ and Ethiopian,² is still in its initial stages and consequently could not be represented. The discussion of others varies in its specificity, depending on the available information and its presentational requirements. Taken together the following surveys reveal the common as well as the different features of Jewish folktales within a historical framework that projects continuity and transformation in Jewish narrative traditions.³

Medieval Hebrew Folk Narratives

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Sources. Medieval Hebrew narrative traditions occur in three types of sources. First are books of knowledge, legal codes, responsa, moral tractates, biblical and talmudic interpretations, history books, travel itineraries and so forth. In these works narratives appear as subsidiary material. Second are narrative anthologies which began to appear in Jewish culture in the 9th century.⁴ The first such collection is the *Midrash on the Ten Commandments* that was copied in many medieval Hebrew manuscripts. It has the form of a classical midrash: A biblical verse (one of the ten commandments) followed by commentary and a narrative illustrating the verse theme. However, in the *Midrash on the Ten Commandments*, the interpretive element is minimal and the narrative part, consisting of Jewish and international folktales, is primary.⁵ The second important collection of folktales is *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, dated to the same period. Within the history of Hebrew literature this work has an innovative form: A narrative framework for a collection of tales. The frame story tells about a miraculous child, Ben-Sira, who was called before Nebuchadnezzar, the great Babylonian king, to be tested for his wisdom. The king asked him twenty-two questions (the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet). Ben-Sira answers with folktales. These tales are among the most important in Jewish folklore: ("Lilith the First Woman," "The Queen of Sheba," "The Animals in Noah's Ark," "The Phoenix"). The second part of the *Alphabet* presents another set of twenty-two proverbs, and stories to explain and illustrate them.⁶ Both collections were