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Dan Ben-Amos
*University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu*

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**Abstract**

The history of oral narratives is in the grip of a paradox. The voice of their past telling is no longer evident, and what is evident is no longer oral. Once committed to writing, oral tales become literature, bearing the consequences of this transformation that occurs under specific social, religious, economic, even technical, circumstances. The shift from orality to literacy involves thematic, stylistic, and poetic modifications, and although in their new state the tales have a relatively higher degree of stability, they still can offer us glimpses into their performance history.

**Disciplines**

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

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RECENT BOOKS IN JEWISH STUDIES

THE HEBREW FOLKTALE: A REVIEW ESSAY

Dan Ben-Amos

A. Introduction

The history of oral narratives is in the grip of a paradox. The voice of their past telling is no longer evident, and what is evident is no longer oral. Once committed to writing, oral tales become literature, bearing the consequences of this transformation that occurs under specific social, religious, economic, even technical, circumstances. The shift from orality to literacy involves thematic, stylistic, and poetic modifications, and although in their new state the tales have a relatively higher degree of stability, they still can offer us glimpses into their performance history.

The transition from orality to literacy is not a value-free act. Rather it is a process that often ideology initiates, and advocacy motivates. In a society that has two kinds of literature, writing acquires the authority and prestige held by the classes in control. As the gate-keepers to this privileged form of communication, scribes do not permit a wholesale transition of oral tradition into new literary texts. They purposefully


select and combine themes and stories from their oral literature, establishing thereby the literary canon of a culture.

As radical as the introduction of literacy into a society may be, the cultural transformation that follows does not eliminate orality. Oral narrators and writers could engage in a continuous interaction, fusing themes, forms, and performances. Neither is dominant in the over all society. While literacy may gain ground, creating an educated class, orality may prevail in the general society, and remain a forceful factor in home education. In his dialogue with Adeimantus, Socrates repeatedly refers to the impact the stories mothers tell their children have on developing the personality of the young (Republic 377a-391e). Hence, an essential task in the history of oral and written literatures is the discovery of the dynamic principles of interaction between these two forms of communication, as they jostle for position in society. They occupy practical and symbolic roles in the institutions for the preservation of cultural memory, such as ritual, private and public storytelling, reading, and recitation, and in the explicit instructions that purport to transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

While past historical folklore study explored both the oral and written representations of narratives, the transition from the one to the other has been taken for granted as a historical process and has not become a research issue. Comparative studies, either thematic or morphological, and formulaic analyses served to unveil the oral residues in literary texts. Though different in many ways, essentially all these three

2. The aim of comparative studies in folklore has mostly been the reconstruction of the oldest form of a particular tale and the mapping of its routes of diffusion. The versions documented by writers served to indicate the knowledge of a particular tale in a certain period in a specific language. For a methodological statement see K. Krohn, Folklore Methodology: Formulated by Julius Krohn and Expanded by Nordic Researchers, translated by R.L. Welsch, Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, vol. 21 (Austin 1971), p. 47. The literary and folkloristic issues involved in the use of folklore themes by writers have been explored for their own sake by many scholars. A bibliography that focuses on the literature of the United States is S.S. Jones, Folklore and Literature in the United States: an Annotated Bibliography of Studies of Folklore in American Literature, Garland Folklore Bibliographies, vol. 5, New York 1984. See also C. Lindahl, Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales, Bloomington 1987; B. Rosenberg, Folklore and Literature, Knoxville 1991; M. Lüthi, Shakespeare's Dramen, Berlin 1957. Recently there has been a surge in literary thematic criticism that, although not always having direct bearing on oral tradition, often does relate to the use of classical and biblical themes by modern authors. Such research often touches upon questions concerning the histories of particular themes. See C. Bremond, J. Landy and T. Pavel, eds., Thematics: New Approaches, Albany 1995; W. Sollors, ed., The Return of Thematic Criticism, Cambridge, MA 1993; F. Trommler, ed., Thematics
methods build upon the logic of inference. If themes, forms, or styles that occur in oral tales and songs turn up in historical texts, the inevitable conclusion is that their direct, or in some cases indirect, source must have been an oral performance, and the same texts, subject to variations, must have been known in past oral cultures. While reasonable in itself, the dynamic relations between orality and literacy are missing from this inquiry. In the many monographs about the history of individual tales, in which literary evidence of the knowledge of these tales is rigorously examined, the process of literary documentation itself has never come into question.3

Fortunately, the history of the Hebrew folktale becomes a fertile ground for the exploration of precisely these issues. It is an integral part of a culture that celebrates scripture to the point of worship, that ascribes to writing the spirituality that the words convey or that is imputed into them. Yet at various historical points, the oral tradition was made central to the literary and religious canon. The history of the Hebrew folktale is thus also an account of the many levels of interaction between orality and literacy.

In his study, Professor Eli Yassif builds upon past folklore methods and forges new directions in the quest to discover the history of the Hebrew folktale. Initially he seeks the residues of orality in the written texts, delineating the possible historical-literary corpus of the Hebrew folktale. Once identified, he sets out to explore the dynamics of interaction between orality and literacy as reflected in the history of Hebrew literature.

There have been previous attempts to outline the history of the Hebrew folktale. Bernhard Heller sketches it bibliographically;4 Emanuel


bin Gorion adds to it a thematic-evaluative analysis. Their periodizations are compatible with each other. Yassif does not depart from their basic structure, though he has an earlier starting point – the Bible – and a later concluding period, including storytelling in present-day Israel. However, unlike his predecessors, Yassif makes the relationship between orality and literacy the primary focus of his history. The identification of themes, formulas, and forms does not resolve the problem, only restates it. He points to the historic oral tales and then questions their incorporation and integration into the written literature. While this has not been Yassif’s explicit research goal, the relation between orality and literacy is the implicit issue that essentially generates all the other analytical concerns in his book: the identification of the literary corpus, the linguistic dilemma, historical storytelling, and the genres in their literary-historical contexts.

B. The Identification of the Literary Corpus

The fundamental issue of any literary history is the delineation of its corpus. Yassif is of two minds in this regard, wavering between strict historical positivism and common-sense. The latter prevails. At first, to justify the study of oral literature through written texts, he proposes that "in fact, all past works of folk-literature are available to us in writing" (p. 4). If "folk-literature" is essentially oral, this is an illogical proposition. While all past tales that are available to us in writing today might have circulated orally, the reverse does not obtain; not all the orally circulated narratives have been committed to writing. Later, in discussing the Hebrew folktale in the Bible, Yassif restates the issues:

It is hard to imagine that folktales in the Bible represent the entire narrative range of Israelite traditions. The biblical writers, like any other authors, historians or editors of tale anthologies, have selected only those tales that served their purposes. Therefore we do not encounter in the Bible obvious humoristic anecdotes, fairytales, erotic narratives and animal fables – genres which at least in part were current in the folk tradition of that period but were not included in any of the biblical books (p. 43).

This observation, which he reiterates in discussing humor in the talmudic-midrashic texts (p. 185), is applicable, in principle, to all periods of Hebrew literature. Practically all the genres that Yassif enumerates above eventually have made their way into either Hebrew script or print, yet many specific tales in each genre have remained unrecorded or

unpublished, and are consequently unavailable for the construction of Hebrew folktale history.

The most dramatic example of textual exclusion is evident in The Hebrew Folktale itself, albeit this time Yassif has assumed the role of a gate-keeper. His discussion of present-day Israeli oral narratives centers primarily on the oral performance of one genre only, namely, the modern analogy of the shevah, a literary form that flourished in hasidic literature. For Yassif, the inclusion of these modern tales about the effective spirituality of charismatic religious leaders demonstrates a thematic continuity in the Hebrew folktale that extends from biblical time to the present. His inclusion of mass-performed narratives in a literary history is a commendable innovative approach. These tales were part of mass sermons delivered in football stadia, that later became available on cassettes. Their consideration as folktales is a serious challenge to acceptable definitions of the genre and represents the originality of Yassif's thinking. However his consideration of these tales as the only example of modern oral tales is somewhat surprising, for oral narrative activity continues in Hebrew in Israel to this day.

The same genres that the editors of the Bible excluded from their books, "humoristic anecdotes, fairytales, erotic narratives, and animal fables," are being told in present day Israel. While the narration of fairytales and animal fables in Israel is on the decline, as it is throughout a world dominated by literacy and electronic communication, the telling of jokes has never abated. The predictions that Jewish humor would

6. A. Druyanov divulges in the introduction to his collection of East European Jewish jokes that, in addition to the published texts, he recorded hundreds of bawdy jokes whose fate he had not yet decided. He was aware of the fact that professional folklorists published such material, yet he wondered what he could do with such material. See Sefer ha-Bedihah ve-ha-Hidud, 5th edition, Tel Aviv 1951, p. 13. He concludes his note by saying: "Nevertheless, I am hesitating, and still do not know, what will become of the material I hold." In a personal communication, his granddaughter mentioned that after his death Druyanov's wife burned the unpublished bawdy jokes. Erotic literature in particular has been subject to social taboo. A Hebrew erotic poem by the scholar Judah Leib Ben Ze'ev (1764-1811) circulated in a manuscript among traditional and non-traditional Jewish students in Eastern Europe, and was published in a limited edition from two manuscripts form after 167 years of scriptural circulation; see G. Kressel, ed., Shir Agavim Me'et Judah Leib Ben Ze'ev, Tel Aviv 1977.

disappear when Jews were no longer a suppressed minority⁸ have never come true. Many jokes have entered into popular print circulation, just as some of the shevaḥim had done earlier and today. Other narrative forms and themes emerge in new contexts.⁹ Yet, from the oral narrative discourse in Israeli society Yassif has selected for discussion only those tales that advocate religiosity in one form or another. In doing so, his historical construction of the Hebrew folktale demonstrates a great measure of continuity, but at the expense of narrative activity on secular themes among non-observant Jews. Admittedly such an expansion of the narrative corpus would require the consideration of some discontinuity in the history of the Hebrew folktale, but changes in directions, genres, themes, and forms are the substance of which history is made.

C. The Linguistic Dilemma

Yassif's choice of Hebrew as the defining language of his corpus demonstrates the paradox inherent in the study of oral tales through their literary representation. Obviously, scholarly expediency has partially determined his selection. It is humanly impossible, and so far there is no evidence to the contrary, to achieve a full command of all the spoken Jewish languages and their oral narratives that would permit a multi-linguistic study of the Jewish folktale. Partially, however, the dichotomy between orality and literacy in Jewish societies has influenced his choice. Yassif is much aware of the issues his selection of language entails. He himself states that language presents one of the most difficult problems in the study of the Hebrew folktale in the Middle Ages.

Throughout this period Hebrew was not the spoken, only the written, language of the Jewish people. Under the rule of Islam the Jews first spoke Aramaic and then quickly switched to Arabic. In Christian Europe they spoke in the vernacular languages and their local dialects, and later spoke in Yiddish... Hebrew was the language of writing, and the relation between vernacular languages and Hebrew was similar to that of those languages and Latin. Nevertheless, we have sufficient evidence documenting Hebrew as a spoken language in which people communicated folk traditions... [and] throughout the

⁹. In 1967, during Israel’s economic recession, local entrepreneurs published selections of the wave of jokes that swept the country. The first title, Kol Bedihot Eshkol, was soon followed by other titles and a weekly publication, Kol Bediḥot ha-Shavu’a, that included jokes mailed in by readers.
Middle Ages in some Jewish centers people conducted their daily life in Hebrew. Similarly the fund raisers that the Jewish community in Eretz Israel sent abroad, spoke in Hebrew about the wonders of the Holy Land and about miracles that took place at the holy tombs in the Galilee. Hebrew was their contact language when they traveled among Jewish communities in Europe. It was also the contact language for students from the Orient who attended the academies of France and Germany, and for Jewish captives that European communities ransomed. Even the literary compositions that were written in the Jewish communities under the rule of Islam, like the Midrash Decalogue, Alpha Beta de-Ben-Sira, and Hibbur Yafe me-ha-Yeshu‘ah, were distributed in the West, and it is clear that they were read aloud on several occasions. All this makes it abundantly apparent that even if Hebrew was not a spoken tongue during the Middle Ages, it was a living language... and the principle medium of creativity and transmission of the Hebrew folktale (pp. 273-274).

However, Yassif’s conclusion is somewhat forced, masking the diglossia in medieval Jewish communities. As he points out, Jews spoke vernacular languages and often developed their own varieties of these languages in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Yiddish, dialects of Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, and Judeo-Español are among the better known spoken languages, that were later used for traditional and creative writing as well. Hebrew, on the other hand, retained a unique status in the Jewish communities. Spoken mostly by men, it was used in religious learning and the verbal rituals associated with religious services, in reading and writing, and in intercommunal contacts. Glossing over these diglossic dynamics and stating that Hebrew was "the principle medium of creativity and transmission of the Hebrew folktale" hides some of the most interesting linguistic aspects of Jewish life. Indeed, some authors and editors used Hebrew to record folktales, but others did not. One of the three books with which Yassif illustrates the prevalence of Hebrew, Hibbur Yafe me-ha-Yeshu‘ah, was written originally in Judeo-Arabic, and only later was translated into and printed in Hebrew.10

It appears that Yassif developed some anxiety concerning the hebraization of Jewish folk-literature. Throughout his chapter on the Hebrew folktale in the talmudic-midrashic period (pp. 83-269), he cites narrative examples, but they are, as they should be, in their original Aramaic, the spoken language of that era. Yet, most of these tales, like

the Talmuds and the midrashic books themselves, have become such an integral part of Jewish culture, that Yassif could become oblivious to their rendition in Aramaic. He simply follows his Aramaic citations with their Hebrew translations.

There is no easy solution to this linguistic dilemma. An account of the representation of the Hebrew folktale in all its linguistic diversity could become unyielding. Yet a history that focuses on its records in Hebrew alone masks the diglossia in Jewish communities, the linguistic dimension of the historical and social relations between orality and literacy, and the verbal and social dynamic processes that are so essential for the understanding of the folktale as a living artistic form.

D. Historical Storytelling

Any historical study of oral narratives requires some evidence that storytelling was a recognized social institution and that oral narrators performed before an appreciative audience. Yassif distinguishes correctly between fictional and historical descriptive storytelling (pp. 274-276). In the former, stressful situations such as a pending execution, a test of wit, shelter from a plague that is raging in the countryside, or temporary dislocations during pilgrimage, serve as the frame for a succession of tales. The Tales of Ben Sira and Tales of Sendebar\(^{11}\) represent this type of fictive narration.

However, Yassif also points to historically probable speech events in both earlier and later literary descriptions. Political discourse, in either public address or private admonition, seems to have been a proper orational context for fables. Jotham's fable (Judges 9:6-20), which Yassif analyzes insightfully (pp. 32-35),\(^{12}\) and Nathan the Prophet's fable (II Samuel 12:1-6), which he does not, are two outstanding examples of the rhetorical use of fables. They served similar purposes in post-biblical


12. Yassif's analysis of the fable inadvertently demonstrates that the anthropological theory of survival has some validity not only in culture but also in the discourse about culture. He opens the chapter about the fable in the Bible with a proposition oriented toward the evolutionary theory of survival, suggesting that the fable contains a residue of animistic thought, and considers its origin in mythical animal tales. Such a theoretical framework detracts from his functional analysis of the rhetorics of Jotham's fable. Modern theories of metaphor and its social use would have been more valuable and relevant in this case.
periods, as well as in other cultures (Aristotle, Rhetoric 1393a-1934a). Yassif draws attention (pp. 90, 227-228) to the political speeches of Rabbi Joshua ben Ḥananiah (Genesis Rabbah 64:10) and Rabbi Akiba (BT Berakhot 61b), who employed fables that are also known from the Aesopic tradition or are based upon some of its stock figures.

The Bible also points to some of the social institutions designed to preserve the collective memory of the Jewish society. Noteworthy among them is the lel shmirim, a term that designates the night of the Exodus and its narrative recapitulation in later generations (Exodus 12:42). In his confrontation with the angel, Gideon alludes to the tales that our fathers told us ( Judges 6:13), directly referring to the transmission of oral narratives in the biblical period.

Yassif does not attempt to uncover indirect descriptions of storytelling in the Bible, and he does not find any in the literature of the Second Temple. However he cites in full and analyzes quite a number of descriptive passages about storytelling and narrators in the talmudic-midrashic literature (pp. 86-93). Yassif distinguishes as narrative occasions casual conversation among sages, their reports about contacts with non-scholars, and the accounts of the medical information they learned. More structured occasions are the exegesis of marked locations, the interpretation of texts in the synagogue sermon, and the festivities associated with personal celebrations. He recognizes the possibility that such descriptions could be fictive rather than historical, yet he argues correctly that even if these accounts were fictive in their particular details, they reflect a social reality of intense oral narrative activity.

It is possible to infer from Yassif's description that in the Middle Ages Jewish society – he cites an evidence from Italy – had become a bi-literal society in which orality and literacy were interdependent (pp. 275-277). Stories from manuscripts were read aloud, and tales that were part of the traditional literary-religious canon were told orally. Storytelling acts became an integral part of the social life of the literate members of the community. Such script- and later print-dependent storytelling apparently continued in Jewish Mediterranean societies at least up to the nineteenth century, when editors and printers published anthologies.

of traditional tales that served that purpose (p. 463).  

The storytelling tradition reached its apex on the threshold of the modern era among the Hasidim. For them the storytelling act achieved a high degree of spirituality, similar to prayers. The high value that the Hasidim placed on storytelling intensified that act among them, and in the second half of the nineteenth century a whole slew of popular publications appeared that affected oral narration and, through literary, editorial, and translation activities, reached broader readership.

The linguistic boundaries that Yassif has set for his study limit his reports about storytelling in non-Hebrew-speaking Jewish communities. Yet, drawing primarily upon literary sources he has been able to demonstrate that there is a continuous tradition of oral storytelling, and that the history of the Hebrew folktale is not merely a figment of artistic creativity, but has its roots in the life of the community.

When Yassif turns to the storytelling act in current Israeli society, the literary base of his study becomes more evident; he is hardly able to shift from reports, to observation. Not only does he not attempt an ethnographic sketch of storytelling acts in modern Israeli communities, but even the narrative performances that he does analyze rarely rely on direct observation. He rather refers to cassette recordings that are distributed commercially on a local basis.

**E. Genres in their Literary-Historical Contexts**

Yassif develops the core of his study along a generic-historic grid that he supplements with cultural, functional, literary, and editorial analyses. He departs from this framework in his last chapter, devoted to the folktale in the modern era. He examines the subject from a variety of points of view, highlighting such questions as the historical roots of the Hebrew folktale and its relations to the international folktale tradition. The assumption of thematic and formal continuity runs through his historical narrative of the Hebrew folktale.

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Genre can be a very effective concept for the description of a literary history. Yassif quotes a persuasive passage from Robert Hodge's *Literature as Discourse* (1990) which states that texts from the past become problematic and unreliable, requiring knowledge of historical rules of genre and domain which seems difficult to acquire and impossible to demonstrate. Texts survive but are meaningless: assumptions of genre and domain are the key to meaning but do not survive. Therefore the starting point for the study of genre and domain must be with texts from the knowable present, so the relations between the interpretation of texts on the one hand and structures of genre and domain on the other can be articulated in all their complexity (p. 567).

This is a commendable goal but it has its pitfalls. For definition purposes Yassif employs the basic folklore generic model. However if, as David Lowenthal's eloquent book title indicates "the past is a foreign country," the analysis of ancient and medieval narratives requires the application of a cultural relativity method, as the ethnographic description of a foreign land does. Their interpretation in terms of modern knowledge or universal models may be strategically efficient, but logically wrong.

To overcome the refraction produced by the prism of the present when it serves to view the past, it is necessary to conceive of genres themselves as subject to historical shifts and cultural turns. They are not fixed forms in an orderly literary hierarchy, but ideas and concepts that people change in time. Yassif proposes at the start of his study to follow a synthesis between two opposing approaches that have become known in folklore studies as analytical categories vs. ethnic genres (pp. 7-9). In practice, however, he employs the various folklore genres as analytical categories, identifying their representation in Hebrew literature. Consequently, while his use of genres serves his methodological need to demonstrate the folklore nature of one tale or another, he also ends up mixing metaphors and models, burdening the Hebrew folktale with many of the ambiguities that have hindered folklore studies in general.


a. Myth

Myth is one of the most problematic generic categories. Its cultural effectiveness depends upon absolute faith in its truth value, but its analytical definition highlights its inherent falsehood. For Yassif the mythic in the Bible appears as (a) cosmic and ethnic foundation stories, (b) non-narrative references to supernatural or primordial beings and, (c) tales of contacts between human and non-human figures. These are rather standard thematic delineations of myth. However, in demonstrating that, Yassif traps himself in the confusion that analytical categories often create. He purports to show the mythic nature of the ethnic-identity foundation story of the encounter between Jacob and the angel (Genesis 32:22-32), but in doing so he demonstrates the affinity between this episode and the fairytale (p. 20). He identifies within the tale a sequence of five narrative functions that appear in the model Vladimir Propp formulated in his study of the morphology of the Russian folktale. The issue at hand does not merely involve a question of generic classification, but demonstrates a fundamental cultural attitude toward the substance of the story. Myth and fairytale are at the opposite poles along the axis of beliefs. The former is the subject of an unshaken belief, the latter is a fiction that can only entertain. Therefore, by resorting to Propp's model, Yassif may have demonstrated the possible orality of the tale, but within folk-literature he identifies the story as belonging to the reverse category of his original intention, considering it cognitively fictitious rather than true.

The methodological confusion is not totally of Yassif's making. The indefiniteness of folklore generic terms has been a scholarly cliché for many years. Partially responding to this problem, Propp wished to formulate a morphological definition of the fairytale genre. But shortly after the publication of his Morphology of the Folktale in English translation in 1958, several scholars found the pattern he proposed either reducible, or at least comparable, to the structures of myth. The

ambiguity of generic identity is hence rooted in the method and not in its application by Yassif.

The author virtually abandons the concept of myth in his analysis of the folktale elements in the literature of the Second Temple, the talmudic-midrashic and the medieval literatures. This is very surprising. The creative imagination, particularly in the talmudic-midrashic period, has often confounded Judaica scholars, and to achieve some degree of descriptive and explanatory adequacy they have often resorted to such terms as "mythropoeic." The term "organic thought" that Kadushin used under the influence of Henri Bergson, and with which Isaak Heinemann explained the ways in which the aggadic imagination operates, projects a mythic and illogical mode of thinking that essentially differs from the rationality that generates Jewish law. From such a perspective, the tales, metaphors, and narrative expansion of the Bible are mythic in character.

Even if Yassif rejects the principle of a different mode of thought, employing his terminological guidelines, the Aggadah contains narratives of and allusions to mythic themes that differ from those occurring in the Bible. The creators of the Aggadah often interpreted the landscape as a mythic code, as they did regarding the Torah itself. An account of Creation in which the signification participates in the formation of the signified, appears to be a unique Jewish myth that is central to the relations between orality and literacy. The written language code precedes the cosmic creation that its function is to describe. Yassif may deal with the transformation of mythic themes in the talmudic-midrashic literature in his discussion of the expanded biblical narrative (pp. 58-64, 93-104), but in his discussion of the myth of that period he limits himself to comparative perspectives, citing, for example, talmudic-midrashic analogies to the Greek and Roman motifs of androgynous creation of humanity and of Pandora's box (p. 101). His treatment of possible Hebrew mythic narratives of this period, such as the notion of the "Dead of the Wilderness" (BT Bava Batra 73b), occurs in the context of his analysis of the talmudic tall tale (p. 209).


26. Ginzberg, op. cit., pp. 5-8. Since methodologically Ginzberg's presentation is synthetic rather than historic, he does not present the historical development of mythic ideas in rabbinic tradition.
Myth is both a concept and a narrative genre, and as either it does not disappear from Hebrew literature. Yassif has selected the framework for the interpretation of myth that G.S. Kirk, a scholar of Greek classical literature, has suggested (p. 603), and therefore it presupposes a notion of myth as mythological pagan narratives. There are a zillion definitions and theories of myth; therefore, in following analytical categories, the selection of a theoretical framework could critically affect the conception of myth. If, for example, Yassif would have turned to the classical anthropological conceptualization of myth formulated by Malinowski as "a charter of society," he could have conceived major parts of the post-biblical oral tradition as myth, because it has indeed provided and articulated for the Jewish people their religious, ethical, and political charter.

b. The Expanded Biblical Narrative

In his "Foreword" Yassif states that the purpose of his study is to provide an "understanding of the social function and the cultural meaning of the [Hebrew] folktale." Functionally, therefore, it is possible to consider the expanded biblical narrative of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages as the Hebrew myth. Applicable to this broad literature is the notion that

myth is the canvas upon which both oral narrative and written literature depict their message, each with such freedom that divergence between different traditions and the innovations that certain [authorities] introduce neither scandalize nor are even difficult to accommodate from a religious point of view. If the myths can vary in this way from one version to another without damaging the balance of the general system it must be because what matters is not the way the story is told, which can vary from one account to another, but rather the mental categories conveyed by the stories as a whole and by the intellectual organization that underlies all the various versions.

29. R. Patai used this concept in the title of his book Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis, Garden City 1964, which he co-edited with Robert Graves and was modeled after the latter's The Greek Myths.
30. Jean-Pierre Vernant, Myth and Society in Ancient Greece, New York 1988, p. 224. The alteration in the bracket is from "authors" that appears in the original text, and is more appropriate to ancient Greek literature.
As the biblical narrative receded in time it obtained a mythic position in Jewish society. Although Yassif does not explicitly propose such a view, it may be inferred from his historical account of the Hebrew folktale. The expanded biblical narrative could have substituted the category of myth that does not appear in his generic scheme for the period, as the Bible itself obtains mythical dimensions for post-biblical generations.

Scholarship indeed has attributed to the expanded biblical narrative mythical qualities, without, however, calling it that. In his monumental The Legends of the Jews (1909-1939), Louis Ginzberg de-historicized the expanded biblical narrative, obliterating any indications of its historical developments. By creating a synthesis of all the available sources of a single theme he has put into practice a romantic idea suggesting that the literary registration of narratives and ideas are markers, like buoys upon the ocean. For him they represented themes that long existed in the abyss of tradition, and their surfacing into literary records was at most accidental. Isaac Heinemann considered the unity of time, a characteristic mythic construction, typical of the expanded biblical narrative.

The historization of the expanded biblical narrative does not necessarily demythologize it. E.E. Urbach, for example, has pointed out that such markers of tradition, even if they existed before, emerge into the literary record in specific historical contexts. His example was the story of the martyrdom of Abraham for which he does not find any reference before the second century C.E. Then, following the Adrianus persecutions, religious martyrdom became a reality in Jewish life, and Abraham the Patriarch, the founder of the religion, provided a behavior model for its adherents (pp. 97-99).

The inquiry into the historical development of the expanded biblical narrative is a separate study which Yassif could not have possibly accommodated within his broader history of the Hebrew folktale. Nevertheless he provides glimpses into the historical emergence of variations in the literary representations of the biblical narrative (pp. 58-64, 93-104). Most prominent is the rise of the midrash as a method for narrative exposition.

Since the midrash had both popular and scholastic venues, it presents Yassif with a new quandary, namely the distinction between folk and

learned traditions. To deal with it he resorts to the theory of "epic laws" that Axel Olrik (1864-1917) formulated. The notion that folk-literature, like a "natural" phenomenon, obeys distinct laws, had a major impact on research in the field because, like the formulaic theory that blossomed years later, it appeared to provide a litmus test that would distinguish folktales from literary narratives. Yassif turns to the "law of contrasts" (p. 74), and to the "law of threes" (p. 95) as supporting evidence for the folk-origins of an expanded biblical narrative. Such a resort to "epic laws" is common in folklore studies, but hardly justified. First, literary creativity enables oral narrators to deviate from these "laws"; second, writers could imitate and reproduce them. Olrik himself is of two minds regarding the possible use of these laws as a distinctive criterion for folk-literature. Initially he proposes that "in popular narrative, storytellers have a tendency to observe certain practices in composition and style that are generally common to large areas and different categories of narratives, including most of the European narrative tradition. The regularity with which these practices appear makes it possible for us to regard them as 'epic laws' of oral narrative composition." But later, at the conclusion of the chapter, he admits that "to a certain degree, these 'epic laws' also apply to literary composition," and in doing so he pulls the rug from under all those scholars who trusted him, including Yassif.

Perhaps one possible solution to the midrashic narrative "folkness" issue rests not with any natural laws but with the realization that the rabbis lived in a society in which orality and literacy did not exclude but were interdependent upon each other. Learning did not contrast with orality but was simply one of its dimensions.

34. The most forceful articulation of this approach appears in J. Fraenkel, Darkhei ha-Aggodah ve-ho-Midrash, 2 vols., Givatayim 1991. Yassif is aware of this book (p. 589, note 2), but points out that it was published after the submission of his manuscript to the press.
35. A. Olrik, Principles for Oral Narrative Research, translated by K. Wolf and J. Jensen, Folklore Studies in Translation, Bloomington 1992 (originally published in Danish in 1921). Olrik's work was very influential in folklore research, although until the present translation only one chapter of this book was available in German and in English; see "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative," in A. Dundes, ed., The Study of Folklore, Englewood Cliffs 1965, pp. 129-141.
36. See above in note 2, the bibliography prepared by J. M. Foley.
37. Earlier in his study (pp. 28, 34) he uses it for the purposes of literary analysis.
38. A. Olrik, op. cit., p. 41.
c. Legend

The legend, the folklore form that rhetorically claims the veracity of its report, is by far the most enduring genre in the history of the Hebrew folktale. Its literary preservation does not necessarily mean a cultural preference for this genre in the oral-performance, but rather indicates the status this genre enjoyed among writers, editors, and anthologists. The legend best served their tendentious selection of texts, enabling them to advocate the truth of their own beliefs, traditions, and ideas about people, places, and supernatural forces.

Within the biblical narrative Yassif distinguishes between the biographical legend – a person-centered narrative, and the local legend – a space-centered narrative. He could have added to these two a third category of "temporal legend" that articulates the significance of a particular calendar date. While there is a potential overlap between local and temporal legends, in the Bible the temporal legends that serve as texts for the celebration of the three pilgrimage holidays, involve locales that lay outside biblical Israelite territory.

Yassif examines two major cycles of biographical legends: the tales of the Patriarchs in Genesis, and those of the prophets in the First Book of Kings. Both have been staple texts for the analysis of folktales in the Bible. But then he proceeds to analyze as legends the Book of Jonah and the frame narrative in Job. His selection is as insightful as it is questionable. While Yassif states that "in themselves the Books of Job and Jonah are not folk-literature" (p. 30), he treats them as if they are, because of the assumed folk roots of their basic motifs. However, in both cases, the available texts exemplify literary use of likely available oral-narrative elements. Such direct thematic borrowing is not peculiar to romantic-nationalistic literature and occurred in many traditional societies in Antiquity. Textually and theologically, scholars are more likely to compare Job to Abraham than to Jonah. The similarity that Yassif draws between the two figures is suggestive, implicitly considering both as pawns in the hands of a God that occasionally

40. Most folklore legend terminology centers on the subject matter "saints" legend, "hero" legend, etc. The historic-geographic school generated also the term "The migratory legend" and currently some use the redundant term "belief legend." The term biographical legend has been used in Aggadah research in A.A. Halevi, Haggadah ha-Historit-Biographit, Tel Aviv 1975.
indulges in whimsical cruelty, making them characters in a moral drama, but not a legend. In neither story is there any rhetorical strategy of historicizing the plot. The rabbinical view that "Job never was and never existed – he was no more that a fable" (BT Bava Batra 15a; JT Sotah 5:6) is indeed an apt literary critical comment that could be extended to Jonah as well.

Yassif also designates the story of David and Goliath (I Samuel 17) as a legend, but in this case he himself exposes his own doubts about the accuracy of this narrative typology. He considers the tale to be an anomaly in the Kuhnian sense; it is biographical, yet it contains elements of either a fragmented epic or a fairytale. The distinction is not a hair-splitting polemic about classification, but directly relates to the historicity of events the Bible reports. The rhetoric of the legend claims historical validity, whereas that of the fairytale suspends belief in the factuality of events. The story of David and Goliath becomes a balancing act between two genres; rhetorically it is a legend, whereas morphologically, following Propp's model, it is a fairytale or, as some contend, an epic. Facing such a dilemma, Yassif considers the tale an "exception to the rules". However, in this case, the rules are imposed not inferred, and therefore the story does not fit a scholarly constructed model rather than the Hebrew cultural cognitive system of folk literary genres.

The search for folk legends in Apocrypha directly concerns what appears to be the main leitmotif of Yassif's study: the relationship between orality and literacy. Since these books lack the literary stricture of canonization, quite a number of their narratives appear with considerable textual variations in later books and oral circulation. Yassif regards their renditions in the Books of the Maccabees, Judith, the Letter of Aristeas and the apocryphal Ezra, as literary texts, often subject to high rhetorical style (pp. 54, 56). At the same time he proposes that these themes circulated orally before they were written, and then later became models for narratives in oral circulation and popular books. While the latter proposal is a possibility, the former is not necessarily a certainty. For example, the respective stories of Heliodoros (II Maccabees 3) and Ptolemy (III Maccabees 1:6-2:23) have the pattern of "The Punishment of the Desecrater," and the book of Judith could have served as a model for many stories that recount how an individual saves a Jewish community from disaster. Tales of both types have been current in script, print, and oral circulation.

44. See above, note 20.
When Yassif turns to the competition-of-wit tale that appears in I Esdras 3:1-4:63, he proposes that its literary version occurs after a long period of oral circulation. For Yassif "the folk-literary nature of this tale does not require special proof" (p. 56). The motifs, the literary pattern, the plot in which the weakest becomes victorious, all attest to the process of transition from oral to written literature. A reader should envision a red warning light when a scholar reaches a conclusion "without doubt", indicating a gnawing uncertainty in the writer's own mind, or when a conclusion "needs no proof," alerting him that there is none. Such a cautious attitude is applicable in this case. The evidence for the oral priority of this tale that is available for Yassif is its registration in elementary folklore research tools which list motif Z42.1. "The Esdras chain: Stronger and strongest, wine, king, woman, truth," and Tale Type 2031A bearing the same description. However, neither reference tool suggests any text preceding the apocryphal book, or beyond its influence. Therefore, according to the available information, it is equally possible to reverse the historical progression of this and other period stories, and attribute chronological priority to their literacy phase. Such a chronological reversal would not damage Yassif's historical narrative. Rather it potentially could make a theoretical and methodological contribution by identifying a literary text that generated a rich oral narrative tradition.

Two cycles of biographical and local legends respectively underscore the issues involved in the historical relationship between orality and literacy. The Daniel tales of which Yassif identifies eleven texts, appear in different sources which, he postulates, draw upon a missing but a reconstructable earlier written source (p. 69). This assumption reflects Yassif's literary orientation, and is not historically necessary. The scattered Daniel stories could draw directly on oral tradition without the mediation of an allegedly missing book. Yassif refers to the Daniel legendary cycle in the anachronistic term shevuah that he borrows from kabbalistic and hasidic folk books. His choice, however, contributes to blurring, rather than distinguishing between, the literatures of different historical periods.

47. For bibliographical references to versions of this and other Second Temple stories that appear in the folk literature of subsequent periods, see M.J. bin Gorton, Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales, abridged and annotated edition, Bloomington 1990, pp. 74-107.
of local legends from the first century centering around traditional burial places of prophets and martyrs. The brevity of the texts suggests that they are a mere surface manifestation of rich oral narrative tradition about local tombs. The convergence in the life pattern of prophets and martyrs in this tradition is indicative of a broader oral and written literature existing at that time.48

The legend is most evident in the talmudic-midrashic texts in the tales about the rabbis, and the historical events that took place in their life time. As a folklorist, Yassif emphasizes the traditional pattern and the rhetorical poetics of these narratives, and assumes that the narrators subordinate historical veracity and particular details to their traditional cognitive structures. He distinguishes two basic patterns in the talmudic-midrashic legend: the biographical and the historical legends.49

In his delineation of the biographical legend, Yassif resorts to Lord Raglan’s model for heroic life in myth – which Dov Noy applied in a modified form to central figures in Jewish folklore. In the process Yassif glosses over some finer distinctions that he himself has made initially. At the start he suggests that folk tradition evolved narratives about the images of three narrative roles: “the sage, the leader, and the holy man” (p. 122). However, the deductive model that he applies to these legends obscures the patterns that the narrators generated within their own tradition. An inductive analysis could have revealed not one but three models of biographical legends, each with its specific narrative range, constructing the biographies of the sage, the leader, and the holy man.

While some episodic overlap does occur, the life events of each role are quite distinct. In their childhood or youth the sages are deprived of learning opportunities. For example, Hillel the Elder was so poor that he could not pay his tuition (BT Yoma 35b); Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was disinherited (Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 1:6); and Rabbi Akiba, about whom Yassif points out the existence of three legends (p. 125), was illiterate before he reached social maturity in marriage (BT Nedarim 50a; Ketubbot 62b-63a). Such narrative episodes are absent from the biographical cycle of holy men, about whose childhood virtually nothing is known. In the biographic-hagiographic legends, Honi the Circle-Drawer, Haninah ben Dosa, and Pinhas ben Yair, for example, appear as adults. Tradition is certainly not a logical system, and some narrative slippage between categories and roles can and does occur, but on the whole there is a mutually exclusive distribution of biographical narratives among these three roles. The synthesis that Yassif formulates draws upon common and comparable features and episodes, but does not

49. See above, note 40.
enable him to develop the insights with which he has begun his analysis.

In subsequent historical periods, these patterns become the models for biographical legend cycles about Jewish figures. Yassif treats these biographical legends as "praise tales," shevahim. Not only is the term anachronistic, but it also represents a methodological shift from analytical categories to ethnic genres. This change does not allow Yassif to unfold in full the historical development of the Hebrew biographical legend.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century Gedaliah Ibn Yahya published in Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah the biographical legends of Rashi, Maimonides, Nahmanides, and Abraham ibn Ezra. Later, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, similar legends about Rabbi Judah He-Hasid appeared in Yiddish in the Ma'aseh Book, drawing upon earlier sources in Hebrew, and an oral tradition in Yiddish. The biographical legends about Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov would be published in Shiuhei ha-Besht during the second decade of the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, a similar legendary cycle emerged among Yemenite Jewry about Rabbi Shalem Shabazi (seventeenth century), which unfortunately Yassif does not include in the discussion, though he employs the model that Dov Noy constructed for those tales. These narratives are a mosaic of intertextual references and allusions to previous models of biographical legends that combine motifs and themes in a deliberate attempt to construct a personal portrait of the figures by implicit emulation of rabbis from the talmudic-midrashic period. The biographical patterns of a sage, a leader, and a holy man are played

50. To the best of my knowledge this term does not occur in folklore studies. I propose it not only as a literal translation of the Hebrew shevah, but also as a parallel to the term "praise song" that is in use in African folklore studies. Within the context of African folklore the term has multiple meanings, but conveniently refers to a well recognized genre. Among the latest studies of this genre is K. Barber, I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town, Washington, DC 1991.

51. See above, note 7. The term shevah has emerged as a generic designation for hagiographic legends among the Safed kabbalists and the East-European hasidim. However, in addition to its application to biblical hagiography, noted above, it has been used in reference to hagiographic tales in Yiddish. See J. Maitlis, The Exempla of Rabbi Samuel and Rabbi Judah, the Pious (A Study in Yiddish Folklore), London 1961 (Yiddish); S. Zlatman, "The Mayse-Bukh: An Old Yiddish Literary Genre," Hasifrut 28 (1979), pp. 126-152 (Hebrew). For further discussion of this issue see J. Dan, "The Beginnings of Hebrew Hagiographic Literature," Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore 1 (1981), pp. 82-100 (Hebrew); idem, "Hagiographic Literature: East and West," Pe'amim 26 (1986), pp. 77-86 (Hebrew).

52. See Maitlis, op. cit. and Zlatman, op. cit., note 51.

against each other, intersect and are reformulated. Although in these books the tales are about medieval and hasidic Jewish personalities, the images of the talmudic-midrashic characters are not far behind, and a comparison of the biographical legends in the two periods would help unfold the historical literary continuity of the genre.

In his analysis of the medieval historical legend, Yassif abandons any structural-morphological model, and shifts to the paradigm offered by the concept of "collective memory" (pp. 329-331). This idea would have been equally applicable to the biblical, talmudic-midrashic, and modern tales. As a folklorist, he does not search for the facts behind the legend, but rather considers it as a representation of the people's historical consciousness, selected and formulated verbally by rabbis, writers, and editors. He recognizes that historical representation can be multi-leveled, containing historical reports, popular tradition, and rabbinical thought (p. 158). Therefore he avoids such a possible interpretative obstacle course, maintaining his focus on the historical legend as the narrative articulation of a Jewish cultural memory in rabbinical-literary attire. By avoiding the quest for the facts behind the legend and concentrating upon the imaginative construction of the past, Yassif is able to articulate the narrative dynamics of folklore. He shows the narrators view and present global events through individual perspectives.

d. The Exemplum

In general folklore scholarship, T. F. Crane provides a starting point for modern research on this form in his The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermons Vulgares of Jacques de Vitry (London 1890), where he suggests that the meaning of exemplum as "illustrative story," likely dates back to the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century. In more recent years, Frederic C. Tubach, Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales FFC 204 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969) has become the key


55. T.F. Crane, p. xviii.
study of this genre. In Jewish folklore, Moses Gaster employed it in the title of his book *The Exempla of the Rabbis* (London-Leipzig: The Asia Publishing Co., 1924). Yassif restricts the use of the term. While, functionally, almost all tales can convey ethical messages, Yassif contends that an exemplum is a tale in which the plot moves along a moral axis, progressing from sin to punishment or from a virtuous act to its reward. More than any other folk-literary form, the exemplum could represent the normative cultural value of a society. An ethical system involves choice between good and evil, which is most suitable for formulation in narrative terms, as Claude Brémond has demonstrated, and as Yassif has applied this to the medieval exemplum (p. 317). In the talmudic-midrashic period Yassif identifies charity, family integrity, observance of the Sabbath sanctity, personal hygiene, and honoring parents as the values that recur in these tales. Unlike the biographical legends that may provide models for behavior, the exemplum characters are anonymous members of the community.

The genre reached its literary peak in the Middle Ages, paralleling the increase in ethical literature and concerns in European vernacular literatures. Yassif distinguishes between popular and sectarian exempla. The latter advocate religious and ethical sect values and have some more developed religious ideas. The popular exemplum remains confined to themes associated with daily life.

e. Tales of Witches and Demons

In contrast to the exemplum that validates cultural values, tales of witches and demons upset them. They present a symbolic inversion of the world. Consequently, in spite of years of serious scholarship about demonology and witchcraft beliefs in Jewish society, scholars entangle themselves in an interpretive dissonance when they face the social and historical reality of demonology in Jewish culture. Its apparent incongruity with monotheism is, to say the least, baffling. In reality religious beliefs in Jewish societies are too syncretic for comfort. By now students of religion, and particularly folklorists, could have accepted the historical and social evidence that faith in God functions as a protective mechanism from the fear of demons and witches that are an

56. It is necessary to follow up this fundamental study with some critical essays edited by Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu, eds., *Les Exemples médiévaux: Introduction à la recherche, suivie des tables critiques de l'Index exemplorum de Frederic C. Tubach*, Classiques de la litterature orale, Carcassonne: Garae/Hesiode, 1992. Yassif (p. 606, note 57) refers to the basic modern scholarship on the genre.

integral part of the religious belief system. Yet, there is a continuing
difficulty in synchronizing the canonic monotheistic belief with the non-
canonic anxiety that demons and witches bestow upon humans.

When Yassif confronts the Hebrew (and Aramaic) narratives about
demons and witches he joins in this general rhetoric of puzzlement,
underscoring the dissonance both in the belief in such supernatural
beings and in their inclusion by the sages in the canon of Jewish
tradition (p. 161). As a reconciliation of this predicament he proposes to
separate "between the beliefs and the descriptions of magic that are
scattered throughout the talmudic-midrashic literature and the tales of
witchcraft. Although the relation between them [i.e., beliefs and stories]
is clear, the tales always have the additional dimension of fictional art
that distinguishes them from direct reports about magical beliefs" (p.
162). Such an approach allows the rabbis to reject demons and witches
and believe in them too, since their fictionalization checks belief in them.

To achieve his goal Yassif engages in some of the more insightful
and penetrating literary analyses in his study. Yet two issues linger on.
First, and this problem extends far beyond the confines of this study, it
is necessary to clarify whether the rabbis believed in demons and
witches. Did they recognize a necessary contradiction between
monotheism and the belief in demons and witches? This question is
fundamental to Yassif's distinction between the substance of fictive and
realistic tales. The repeated attempts to construct a rabbinic world that
is based on law, logic, and rationality, often ignores the historical reality
of the biblical, talmudic-midrashic, and medieval worlds that included
beliefs in demons, evil supernatural forces, and witches that controlled
them. Both the learned and unlettered classes believed in them. The
rabbinical condemnations of belief in witchcraft and demons may well
represent a dichotomy between ideal normative statements and religious
praxis. The fear of the demonic unknown could have been so powerful
that, as Yassif quotes from Numbers Rabbah 12:3, the Torah itself
served as a protective magic (p. 167).

Second, Yassif is correct that many fictional tales have demonic
characters and their plots evolve within a demonic world, the "other" of
the other world. In later periods, demons appear where fairies do in
European folktales. However, not all the tales with demonic characters
are fictive. For example, in the tale that he analyzes (p. 172), the friendly
demon Ben-Temalim helps Rabbi Simeon Bar Yoḥai to save the Jewish

58. An analogous question has been posed by P. Veyne in his book Did the Greeks
59. See for example tale no. 216 "The Keys to the Miser's Treasures," in M.J. bin
Gorion, Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales, Bloomington 1990, pp. 421-
422.
community of Rome. The story is about historical characters and their visit to a known city, building upon the rhetorical devices of a legend rather than a fictive tale. In other words, demons and witches do not serve as distinctive markers indicating the fictionality of the account.

f. The Fable and the Animal Tale

Simple as they may appear, the fable and the animal tale have a complex history negotiated between orality and literacy. Even though Stith Thompson, following Aanti Aarne, preserves the first division of The Types of the Folktale (1928, 1961) to "Animal Tales", of which many are fables, he considers it primarily a literary genre. He states clearly:

Of the five or six hundred fables belonging to the two literary traditions of India and of Greece, fewer than fifty seem to have been recorded from oral story-tellers, and most of these are of relatively rare occurrence. Even when stories of this kind are taken up from unlettered persons, one must be very careful in assuming that they have had any considerable history as oral tales. The cheap fable collections have doubtless been the most important element in preserving these stories and handing them on.

And before listing the fables that have an oral history in one country or another he states: "[I]n nearly all instances the relation of these fables to actual folklore is very limited".60

Subsequent research has confirmed Thompson's observation, yet may have cast a different light upon the role of this genre in mediating between orality and literacy. Studies dealing with classical and ancient fables suggest that fables and animal tales have been among the first oral genres that underwent literarization. Writers and even school children recorded them briefly, and poets versified them.61 Literacy has elevated their social status and made them a legitimate illustrative genre for orators, and the Hebrew examples that Yassif quotes (pp. 31-35, 212-231) confirm a similar use in biblical and rabbinical societies.

If fables in the Bible are rare, and if, as Yassif implicitly suggests, they do not figure significantly in the Apocrypha, they do occur in abundance in the talmudic-midrashic literature.62 In fact their sheer quantity is overwhelming. Yassif disregards most of these fables because they lack a narrative plot and cannot sustain an independent existence (p. 212). Those that do so, serve him for the examination of four issues: (a) the

61. See above note 13, and P. Cames, Fable Scholarship: An Annotated Bibliography, Garland Folklore Bibliographies, New York 1985.
generic transformation of fables from narrative to proverb; (b) the dependence of rabbinical fables on Greco-Roman fable literature; (c) the role of the fable in biblical text interpretation; and (d) its role in political-ideological speech-making.

a. The use of proverbs as a coda for the fable occurs most prominently in the Aesopic literature. Often there is a weak, or missing, semantic fit between the fable and the proverb. On those occasions that the proverb does succinctly convey the same message the fable does, it establishes itself as an allusion to the longer plot, and can, and often does, have a mnemonic or referential function in conversations and speeches. There is evidence of the relevance of this general principle to fables and proverbs in the talmudic-midrashic literature (pp. 213-217).

b. The influence of Greco-Roman culture on Jewish life and literature during the period of the Second Temple and the era of the Talmuds and midrash is well known. Yassif builds upon this research and summarizes the occurrence of the Aesopic fable in rabbinical literature, pointing out that the rabbis did not borrow the Hellenistic fables automatically, but used them creatively.

c. Yassif demonstrates that the fable could serve as an interpretive metaphor for the biblical text. The example that he provides (p. 212) suggests that this use follows common midrashic principles of association between texts of different biblical books. Thus, the biblical metaphor of "a lily among thorns" (The Song of Songs 2:2) becomes a nucleus for a fable.

d. During the talmudic-midrashic period the rabbis used the fable to achieve a rhetorical impact. The most prominent examples are the fables of "The Lion and the Crane" and "The Fox and the Fish" that Rabbi Joshua ben Ḥanania and Rabbi Akiba respectively used on two different occasions (Genesis Rabbah 64:10; BT Berakhot 61a).

Yassif points out that the talmudic-midrashic literature also preserves many animal tales that were known at the time, but that did not have any allegorical function. However, the example that he cites of the tale about the house snake that saves the master of the house from the poison a field snake spit into a plate, has in this context an ethical value. It is indeed quite possible, as Yassif proposes, that many animal tales existed in oral circulation. The narrators build not only upon the appropriate narrative situation, but also upon the conventions of the symbolic significance the animal acquired in the culture. Their incorporation into an exegetical literature is bound to have an interpretive, often moralistic, value, reflecting in many ways their use in conversation.

Yassif points out that in European Jewish society the animal tale disappeared from oral tradition and was transformed into a literary
genre, paralleling a similar literary-historical process that Thompson observed in general folklore. This observation is very suggestive, and it is worth examining whether it applies to the Hebrew folktale in particular or to animal tales in other Jewish languages as well. Modern research on Jewish folk-literature may indicate that the lament over the demise of the animal tale has been somewhat premature. A volume devoted to *The Jewish Animal Tale* (1976), edited by Dov Noy, demonstrates a viable tradition of animal tales in different Jewish communities. Many of them have parallels in folktale traditions in other languages. While it is possible that Jewish narrators learned these animal tales from storytellers of other peoples, it is likely that if borrowing occurred, the themes, but not the genre, were new. Most of the tales in this collection come from Jewish narrators of non-European communities.

g. Novella

The novella, the realistic romantic tale, requires a new examination of the relationship between orality and literacy in Hebrew folk-literature along historical lines. Yassif demonstrates convincingly the occurrence of this genre among medieval Hebrew folktales (pp. 371-380). However it is not clear whether the narratives of this genre became part of medieval folk-literature in the Middle Ages, or had a history in oral traditions of a previous period. Yassif opens his discussion with a firm proposition stating that "as it becomes clear from the evidence in the previous chapters, the novella is one of the most ancient narrative genres in Hebrew" (p. 371). Yet the evidence that he cites earlier favors written rather than oral compositions. Yassif distinguishes the Joseph narrative cycle (Genesis 37-41) and the Book of Esther as the primary examples of biblical novellas. Both stories incorporate motifs that appear in folk-literature, yet Yassif himself, in agreement with general scholarly consensus, suggests that "the extant versions of these tales are complex literary compositions, encompassing many details, that could not have been folktales in their present form" (p. 39). The primary example of the apocryphal novella is the Book of Susanna. Employing the same criteria, Yassif points out that in this tale "it is possible to recognize the craftsmanship of a literary artist who drew upon the first of the biographical legends of the folk hero Daniel, his revelation, and transformed it to a complex and encompassing literary composition" (p. 73). Yassif compares the two versions of Susanna, in the Septuagint and in the Theodotus translation, and concludes that the latter addresses a more popular audience. However, his initial statement about the original Hebrew version of the book is still valid. Obviously, the limited quantity of available texts does not permit any definitive conclusions, but the scant evidence suggests that this genre underwent
a historical process of popularization. At earlier periods writers exercised their creative talents employing the novella form and themes, and later oral storytellers and the medieval scribes who drew upon their traditions, embellished the genre.

h. Fairytale

The paucity of references to the fairytale is technically misleading, but culturally and historically significant. Yassif devotes to this genre a subchapter in his discussion of the Hebrew folktale in the Second Temple period, analyzing the Book of Tobit as a fairytale, Tale Types 505-508, "The Grateful Dead." Yet discussions of fairytales in other periods appear elsewhere in the study, subsumed under different topics. Yassif has identified the stories of Jacob's struggle with the angel (Genesis 32:22-32) as a myth that partially agrees morphologically with the fairytale genre, and considered the David and Goliath story (I Samuel 17) to be a legend or an epic that conforms formally to the fairytale pattern (pp. 30, 76). The fairytale is absent from talmudic-midrashic literature, but is found in medieval manuscripts which Yassif discusses as international tales (pp. 292-310) and as novellas (pp. 371-380). Similarly, in his examination of the adaptation of international themes to Jewish society (pp. 480-506), he analyzes several fairytales that Jewish storytellers incorporated into their repertoires.

Fairytale or Märchen, as folklore scholars refer to these narratives, do appear in Yiddish and in the narrative repertoires of other Jewish communities. Their representation among the tales recorded in Israel that are on deposit at the Israel Folktale Archives is substantial, yet their admittance into the Hebrew canon of folk-literature appears to have been rather cautious. Even when they fully integrate into their story-line Jewish and Hebrew cultural symbols and historical references, their analysis occurs in the context of external influences, cultural borrowing, and adaptation. Yassif is sensitive to this problem and he points out that "there is always the possibility, at least a probability, that some international narrative traditions, about which there was no information prior to the modern era, are in fact Jewish tales" (p. 480), or at least, it is possible to add, tales told in Jewish societies. Warren Roberts thus surmises regarding the Judeo-Spanish version of Tale Type 480 "The Spinning-Women by the Spring. The Kind and the

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Unkind Girl” that Max Grunwald recorded at the end of the nineteenth century, represents a version told in Spain, among the general population as well as by the Jews before the Expulsion. The similarity between this version and Yemenite and Moroccan versions of the related Tale Type 510 “Cinderella” reveals a narrative cycle told, albeit not exclusively, in Jewish societies.64 Even earlier, Walter Anderson proposed that the Kaiser und Abt story, Tale Type 922 “The King and the Abbot,” that he found to be well known in an East European Jewish community, dates back to the seventh-century Jewish community in Alexandria.65

Both conclusions are tentative by definition and it is quite possible that these tales actually originated with another group of people. Nonetheless, the availability of fairytale tradition in Jewish societies, scant as it is, could enable us to consider Jews as fully active and creative participants in the formation of the global fairytale literature, and not only as recipients or transmitters of this genre. The minimal religious semantic load of these tales often militated against their inclusion in Hebrew anthologies. The unique literary artistry of Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav66 demonstrated his ability to employ figures and literary conventions of the fairytale tradition in religious, mystical, and allegorical context. However, the oral telling of these tales in Jewish society was not dependent on such an interpretation and could have occurred without such a semantic transformation, retaining their secularity and representing Jewish ideas about a fantastic, "other" world.67 Unfortunately the lack of Jewish markers excluded a great part – fortunately not all – of this narrative tradition from advanced Hebrew literacy. The relatively meager representation of the fairytale in the Hebrew folktale tradition, might well be a function of writing and editing in Hebrew, which are processes of literacy and linguistic canonization.


rather than a reflection of the historical performances of narratives in
diverse Jewish societies.

i. The Humorous Tale

The humorous tale represents the sharpest contrast between the oral
narrative and its literary context in Hebrew (and Aramaic) sources. Its
often bawdy subject matter, its expression of irreverence toward
authority and social institutions, and its entertaining function exclude it
from texts that purport to uphold law, to chart religious and social
values, and to be manifestations of holiness. Yassif is keenly aware of
the incongruity between humor and the Bible, the Apocrypha, the
Talmuds, and the midrashim. Consequently his analysis of the relation
between oral humor and judicial and religious texts encapsulates the very
issues around which the entire history of the Hebrew folktale revolves.
He underscores the censorship of the writers and the richness of the
material they leave behind (p. 185).

Yassif’s analysis of the humorous narrative in talmudic-midrashic
literature insightfully examines the few textual examples of humor that
appear in various books of the period. He demonstrates the use of
humor as a mechanism of social control and social criticism, and its
function in inter-class and inter-gender conflicts in Jewish society, as
well as its role in inter-ethnic clashes between Jews and non-Jews.
Furthermore he offers perceptive literary analysis of the talmudic tall
tales, their rhetorical devices and thematic range.

Unfortunately, he stops his analysis of the humorous tale with the
talmudic-midrashic literature in spite of the fact that, during the
twentieth century humor has been increasingly seen as a particular
quality of the Jews.68 Theories that seek to explain this apparently new
association abound, and at least some of them, consider Jewish humor
as a function of Jewish life in the Diaspora.69

Does the Hebrew humorous tale in Israel differ from Jewish humor in
the Diaspora – qualitatively, functionally, rhetorically, or in any other
way? The demonstration of a continuity in its humorous qualities would
invalidate some of the central theories about Jewish humor and would
force us to rethink these issues. Textual evidence as a basis for analysis
has been available not only in conversations, daily speech, and the many
Hebrew anthologies of jokes, but also in the very “folk books” that
Yassif would have liked to consider as part of folklore,70 and that have

68. E. Oring, “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,”
69. See abov, note 8.
70. See above, note 14.
been published in Israel periodically. Such an examination could have explored the historical continuity of Jewish verbal humor and, if the image of the Jew in modern society is not merely a literary construct of the mass-media but has some basis in reality, could have addressed the most basic questions about Jewish culture, world view, and social relations.

F. Conclusion

Yassif sets out to discover the history of the Hebrew folktale, and finds the history of its commitment to writing. Throughout his study there is an interplay between the questions he boldly asks and those he faces in his pursuit of folktales in Jewish societies. His adherence to Hebrew tales casts his research into a linear mold that attention to the many Jewish languages would have broken. But the tension between unattainable goals and available and accessible documents adds drama and depth to his search, and also raises a new set of questions that seek resolution. Looking for oral tales, Yassif discovers that their inclusion in literary works follows patterns of thematic and generic association that the editors adopt, very much like narrators do in their storytelling (pp. 232-269). In their renditions he finds a thematic and formal continuity that dominates the history of the Hebrew folktale. Successive generations retold the stories that their predecessors had transmitted; they expanded upon them, and moved them up or down an evaluative scale of literary forms that each society maintains. The thematic and formal continuity in the Jewish narrative tradition is certainly not merely a construct of Yassif's historical narrative, but has its roots in learning, tradition, rituals, and customs.

Yassif conducts his research with scholarly acumen and writes with great erudition. His highly informative notes take up about one sixth of the book. They accompany an academic text in a readable style, overarching a long span of literary history in which orality and literacy are interactive forces that together form the tradition of the Hebrew folktale.