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Review of Moses Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis; Being a Collection of Exempla, Apologues and Tales Culled from Hebrew Manuscripts and Rare Hebrew Books*

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Abstract

Among the numerous folkloristic publications of Moses Gaster (1856-1939) *The Exempla of the Rabbis* stands out as a major contribution that has withstood controversy and new developments in scholarship. It is a standard work in Jewish folklore and a basic tool for research in haggadic-midrashic literature; moreover, Gaster's extensive erudite annotation and abundant references to European and Asian traditions make the book indispensable for folktale research in general. It has long been out of print, and this new edition is a timely publication.

Disciplines

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

The Exempla of the Rabbis; Being a Collection of Exempla, Apologues and Tales Culled from Hebrew Manuscripts and Rare Hebrew Books. By Moses Gaster. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1968. Reprint of 1924 edition with a prolegomenon by William G. Braude. Pp. lxx + 314 + 208, notes and corrigenda, preface, bibliography of Jewish literature, bibliography of general literature, comparative notes, index. \$12.50.)

Among the numerous folkloristic publications of Moses Gaster (1856–1939), *The Exempla of the Rabbis* stands out as a major contribution that has withstood controversy and new developments in scholarship. It is a standard work in Jewish folklore and a basic tool for research in haggadic-midrashic literature; moreover, Gaster's extensive erudite annotation and abundant references to European and Asian traditions make the book indispensable for folktale research in general. It has long been out of print, and this new edition is a timely publication.

The Exempla of the Rabbis is a collection of tales from several sources, most of which date back to the early and late Middle Ages. The dating of the major collection in this book was the main issue of controversy following publication of the book in 1924. Gaster proposed an early date and suggested the fourth century as *terminus ad quem*. His reviewers and subsequent critics preferred a later date, the twelfth and even the fourteenth centuries. Both Gaster and his critics based their arguments on linguistic, stylistic, typographic, and thematic evidence. At stake was the primacy of *The Exempla of the Rabbis* as a source for later compilations of narratives and the insertions of haggadic materials in the Talmuds and exegetical literature.

The rabbinical postbiblical literature consisted of compilations of religious and ethical precepts, theological arguments, juridical regulations, and exegetical interpretations of the Old Testament. The various editors of these works inserted tales, fables, and exempla in direct relationship to foregoing discussions or to biblical phrases that required elucidation and supplementation. Only during the Middle Ages did writers, editors, and popularizers begin to lift the narrative materials from their theological or ethical context, presenting them independently as an entertaining though moralizing literature. Gaster's dating of this manuscript was, then, nothing short of revolutionary. He proposed that this collection was an independent compilation of exempla as early as the fourth century and that this very collection was probably the source for many narratives in the Talmuds and the haggadic works (43–49). These assertions met with vigorous criticism. Hurt, Gaster retreated slightly from his position and proposed that both the author of his collection and the editors of the Talmuds availed themselves of a third collection, similar to his own but now lost.

Folklorists were not involved in the complicated argument about the place of *The Exempla of the Rabbis* in the chronology of Jewish literature. They valued the opportunity to glance into the rich narrative materials of Jewish folklore, the tales about rabbis, saints, martyrs, and oppressive rulers appearing in legends, fables, and *Märchen*, many of them with parallels in the folklore of East and West. Gaster's references to parallels in European and Asian traditions were further assets to the comparative folklorist.

Since the book was first published, comparative folklore has developed systematic research methods in the forms of the motif and type indexes. Moreover, in the course of the development of these research tools, Gaster's book in particular was tapped as a

primary source. Dov Noy's "Motif Index of Talmudic-Midrashic Literature" (unpublished dissertation, Indiana University [Bloomington, 1954]) includes many direct references to *The Exempla of the Rabbis*. It is, hence, unfortunate that William Braude, the editor of the present reprint, did not incorporate the available motif analysis in this volume.

Otherwise the new edition includes two valuable additions. First is a "Prolegomenon" in which William Braude discusses the collection and surveys the scholarly controversy that followed its publication in 1924. Second is a section of "Notes and Corrigenda." The first edition was marred by errors due to Gaster's loss of sight. Their correction facilitates the use of the book and increases the value of *The Exempla of the Rabbis* as a major research tool in both Jewish and international folklore.

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Limba Stories and Storytelling. By Ruth Finnegan. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967. The Oxford Library of African Literature. Pp. xii + 352, two appendixes, bibliography. 60s in U.K., \$14.40 elsewhere.)

That gallant handful of American anthropologists who steadfastly rejected the strictures of British functionalist "social" anthropology and insisted on the importance of folklore studies will find a certain vindication in this almost-Boasian fokorel monograph by a student of Evans-Pritchard. During field research in 1961 and 1962-1963, some twenty-nine Limba narrators contributed ninety-nine texts, thirteen riddles, and ten proverbs translated into English by the collector, who also included three texts in the original Limba. This collection is preceded by comprehensive essays (pp. 3-109) on Limba ethnography, roles and techniques of narrators, functions of tales in Limba culture, native and foreign classifications, subject matter, innovation and the range of allowable stylistic variation, and individual variation versus tradition; in short, the very model of a folklore monograph of the American anthropological "school." And true to Dorson's oft-quoted critique of such studies, it is innocent of any attempt at cross-culture comparison or of any recognition of the existence of the type and motif indexes, although many of the tales are recognizable international types.

The Limba, who number over 200,000 and raise hill rice in their seven chiefdoms in northern Sierra Leone, are still relatively conservative and "bush," in spite of frequent contact with young Limba men returning from wage labor in Freetown or with the Muslim Fulani and Mandingoes now infiltrating their territory. Stories are told only by males and only at night, when they are told for entertainment, although they may be cited in the daytime as precedents in formal legal discussions. Stories are seen as deriving from "the old people," but individual narrators have recognized styles and subjects. No "Limba philosophy of life" is expressed in the tales, but they are believed to contain truth, usually expressed by analogy, and to be uniquely Limba.

Although the author's stated goal is to analyze this body of tales as "a form of literature in its own right, worthy of study in literary terms" (p. v), she makes no attempt at the sort of psychological or sociological speculation now practiced by literary critics. In fact, her analysis is curiously negative, so much so that at first glance a Negritudi-