

RELLA KUSHELEVSKY, *Moses and the Angel of Death*. Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature 4. New York: Peter Lang, 1995. Pp. xii + 325.

For many years comparative thematics was the principal method of comparative literature until formalism and structuralism emerged as the key terms of avant-garde scholarship. Now, in an era when these very terms are relegated to the backyard of the academy by trendier directions, thematic analysis is enjoying a modest rejuvenation.¹ Within this re-emerging paradigm Yoav Elstein and Avidov Lipsker have launched a very ambitious project known as “The Thematological Encyclopedia of Jewish Literature.” They have outlined their methodology in two programmatic essays,² and together and separately published several case studies.³ Yoav Elstein has also guest-edited volume 30 of *Criticism and Interpretation* (1994) which includes several thematological essays by diverse hands.

Rella Kushelevsky is a team member of the “Thematological Encyclopedia” project and her study, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, is a systematic and comprehensive exposition of its method. The theological centrality of Moses’ death, the long literary history of the story, and its multiple textual representations enable Kushelevsky to test the basic assumptions of this method and to explore its potential for the study of Jewish literature in a way not per-

¹ See for example the following works: Claude Bremond, Joshua Landy, and Thomas Pavel, eds., *Thematics: New Approaches* (Albany, 1995); Horst S. Daemmrich, “Themes and Motifs in Literature: Approaches–Trends–Definition,” *The German Quarterly* 58 (1985) 566–575; Horst S. and Ingrid Daemmrich, *Themes and Motifs in Western Literature: A Handbook* (Tübingen, 1987); Gerald Prince, *Narrative as Theme: Studies in French Fiction* (Lincoln, NE, 1992); Werner Sollors, ed., *The Return of Thematic Criticism* (Cambridge, 1993); Frank Trommler, ed., *Thematics Reconsidered: Essays in Honor of Horst S. Daemmrich* (Amsterdam, 1995).

² Yoav Elstein and Avidov Lipsker, “Thematology in the Literature of the Jewish People: An Outline,” *Bikoret u-Farshanut* 30 (1994) 7–14 (Hebrew); idem, “The Homogeneous Series in the Literature of the Jewish People: A Thematological Methodology,” in Trommler, ed., *Thematics Reconsidered*, pp. 87–116.

³ Yoav Elstein and Avidov Lipsker, “Joseph Who Honors the Sabbath: A Thematological Test Case,” *Fabula* 37 (1996) 87–112; Yoav Elstein, “The Gregorius Legend: Its Christian Versions and Its Metamorphosis in the Hassidic Tale,” *Fabula* 27 (1986) 195–215; Avidov Lipsker, “The Mirror that did not Shine for R. Simeon the Great of Mainz—An Interpretation of an Expositional Motifeme in the Ma’aseh Book Version of the Story about the Pope Elhanan,” *Chulyot* 3 (1996) 33–57 (Hebrew); idem, “The Bride and the Seven Beggars—Telos Shifts as a Change in Cultural Values,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 13–14 (1992) 229–248 (Hebrew); idem and Joseph Bamberger, “Rabbi Amram’s Coffin,” *Chulyot* 4 (1997) 121–140 (Hebrew).

mitted by other themes, whose position in tradition is more limited. Thematological research takes a historical-holistic conception of Jewish literature in which written texts—biblical, talmudic-midrashic, and medieval—serve as thematic stabilizers. Consequently, in contrast to the high textual fluidity in general folklore, Jewish tradition enjoys great homogeneity. This literary condition allows for dialectics between a meta-historical overview of a theme and a historical-chronological approach that deploys versions along a diachronic axis. The method's analytical tools and terms are taken from the thesaurus of folklore and literary criticism: motif, motifeme, *telos*, and the neologism *constanta* that refers to a motifemic sequence that recurs in many, if not all, the versions of a thematic series.

The biblical text is the starting point for this narrative theme, and as is often the case, it is not its lucidity but rather its ambiguity, even implicated and textual contradictions that generate midrash. Firstly, how could “the man of God” (Deut 33:1) and “the servant of the Lord” (Deut 34:5) die like an ordinary mortal? Secondly, how is it possible to have very clear directions to Moses' tomb: “He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor,” and at the same conclude that “no one knows his burial place to this day” (Deut 34:6). The narrative resolutions of these puzzles repeat themselves over two millennia of literary history in which Kushelevsky distinguishes six chronological divisions: Hellenistic, tannaitic, early medieval, late medieval, Renaissance, and modern. Throughout these periods the thematological series of “The Death of Moses” share a dominant ideological message, its *telos*, that manifests itself in a narrative tension between “death” and *Genizah* (“concealment”) which Kushelevsky terms the “*Genizah*-Death Oxymoron.” The narrative balance between the death of Moses and the concealment of his body and soul undergoes shifts and transformations. Hellenistic literature tends to describe Moses' death as concealment that may even take cosmic dimensions. For example, Joshua contends in the Testament of Moses: “Your sepulcher is from the rising to the setting sun, and from the South to the limits of the North, the whole world is your sepulcher” (11:8). The tannaitic texts in Sifre, Abot de Rabbi Nathan, Midrash Tannaim, and talmudic *baraitot*, shift the emphasis to the confrontation between Moses and the Angel of Death, viewing Moses' death in human terms, yet without completely abandoning the notion of *Genizah*. Kushelevsky considers the early-medieval midrashic texts of Tanḥuma and Deuteronomy Rabbah to be a narrative progression in the same direction, which reaches the peak of its expansion in the 13th century in texts such as *Midrash Peḥirat Moshe Rabbenu Ḥalav ha-Shalom*. that A. Jellinek includes in his anthology of small midrashim⁴ and the more

⁴ Adolph Jellinek, ed., *Bet ha-Midrash. Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur* (Leipzig, 1853–1877; reprint ed. Jerusalem, 1967) 1:115–129.

unique version of *Peṭirat Moshe*, of Spanish provenance, dated 1289, that is included in MS Parma 327/37 (pp. 261–278). These and some other earlier renditions of the story served as the basis for its diffusion in Jewish societies in manuscripts and later in print. In “A Chronological List” Kushelevsky registers 83 texts, of which over sixty are from the 11th century and later. Some copied, others combined earlier renditions, and the 20th-century anthologies recovered the texts from traditional books for modern readers. *Midrash Peṭirat Moshe Rabbenu ‘Alav ha-Shalom* is the most comprehensive rendition of the story, including all of its motifemes, and then some, telling of the three major predicaments that Moses faced: succession, denial of entry to the Promised Land, and death.

Kushelevsky’s analysis of the story sets new standards for the adjective “exhaustive.” Her bibliography of primary sources, rendered twice, first as “A Categorical List,” (pp. 285–293), then as “A Chronological List” (pp. 294–296), is definitive. She makes effective use of the research tools and concepts of motif, motifeme, *telos*, and *constanta* to explore the comparative, structural, ideological, and historical aspects of the narrative, presenting the reader with a multi-dimensional study.

Thoroughness, however, is not only its own reward, but also its own challenge. Kushelevsky has made such a careful and comprehensive study of the “Moses and the Angel of Death” theme that, as meaningful research often does, she implicitly casts new doubts and generates more questions concerning her subject matter. These require a re-examination not only of her own conclusions, but also the basic principles of the thematological method.

First, like the post-biblical interpreters and retellers whose texts she analyzes, Kushelevsky privileges the biblical rendition of the “death of Moses” story as a version that transcends variations. She excludes it from the dialectics it might engage with its meta-historical conception. The Bible itself does not appear on any lists of sources. Yet, while the fragmentary or individual versions of this biblical story are irrecoverable from history, the biblical text itself does suggest the occurrence of prior oral tradition, or even, as Higher Criticism has postulated, the existence of different written sources. The conflicting views of Deut 34:6, that locate and obscure the place of Moses’ sepulcher at the same time, hint at the availability of at least two opinions. Moreover, even in the biblical narrative itself there are several previous statements concerning Moses’ death, denial of entry to the Promised Land, and succession (Num 27:12–23; Deut 1:37, 3:23–29; 4:21–22). While the Bible has a central position in Jewish culture and religion, in a study of the literary history of the Jewish people, it is necessary to apply to its analysis the same criteria to which other texts are subjected and to adhere to the same principles that guide their interpretation. Kushelevsky herself formulates this attitude quite clearly when she writes: “This emphasis on continuity dictates an egalitarian approach; all versions of a given series are deemed equally

important, with no priority given to any particular version according to generic or chronological considerations” (p. 10).

Secondly, the historical-holistic conception of the entire corpus of narrative versions is at the basis of Kushelevsky’s interpretation that the *Genizah*-Death Oxymoron is the core theme of the story, and she observes a shift in *telos* along this axis from the Hellenistic to tannaitic versions. However, it is also possible to view this change not as a narrative shift but rather as a cultural one. The emphasis on *Genizah*, and hence also on Moses’ *psyche* (“soul”), is more in keeping with Hellenistic ideas of the afterlife. Therefore the narrative shift that Kushelevsky observes in tannaitic and later Jewish sources, emphasizing death and Moses’ human mortality, may be indicative of the inner struggle of rabbinic Judaism attempting to rid itself of its Hellenistic heritage. Furthermore, the Hellenistic emphasis on *Genizah* occurs in the works of highly-educated people. The tannaitic tradition, even when generated by learned sages, was more attuned to folk culture and oral tradition. Hence the shift in balance from *Genizah* to death may involve also a transition from an educated to a more popular social context for this narrative tradition.

In conclusion, as much as Kushelevsky confirms the methodological effectiveness of the thematological project, the logical consequence of her detailed and rigorous analysis would require a modification in its basic assumptions. The search for turns and transformations in the history of a theme would shift the process from the high grounds of meta-history to the historical, literary, cultural, and social dynamics of tradition, in which narrators relate to texts that influence them and to audiences and readers that listen to and read them.

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