

## A Short Note on Ancient Jewish Narrative

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The fundamentals of ancient Jewish narrative are evident in the Hebrew Bible, the parade example for the construction and development of early Jewish storywriting and -telling which for the sake of convenience is at best defined as part of the Jewish literature that was mostly written during the Second Temple Period (538 BCE – 70 CE). The available evidence immediately presents the problem in determining an exact date and a historical setting of the relevant sources. Generally, the narrative writings of the Jews do not admit of easy classification and definition. There are many ambiguities with regard to the proper contents of ancient Jewish stories and their occasional functioning as imitations or expansions of the biblical text, their division into thematical categories, the traditionality of their motifs, and the complexity of their form.

Nowadays there is much discussion about the authorial and redactional intentions of the biblical account itself, and recent studies have stressed the ideological motivations underlying the biblical material. Nevertheless, one is easily tempted to reach to defining criteria of ancient Jewish narrative from literary examination of biblical texts. However, the Hebrew Bible was not exclusively used for religious exegesis citing and expounding verses and passages from the canonical books. The apocryphal and pseudepigraphal stories were written without direct reference to the canonical text or without the recourse to biblical style. In many cases these narratives have a point of departure in the biblical text, but the stories are developed to bring out different emphases and new motifs. Therefore, the literary peculiarities of later fiction deserve to be treated in their own right.

Much of the early Hellenistic period in Palestine during the years 332–167 BCE does not offer direct sources. In his *Antiquities* Josephus proves that as a historian he too depends upon accounts of a legendary and novelistic nature for the description of this period. Here we touch upon one of the most intricate

problems of ancient Jewish narrative: its historicity or rather pseudo-historicity. Dividing Jewish stories by their historical or non-historical context will lead to great difficulty because of the high degree of fictionalization of any actual or historical detail. The theological concern of the narrators cannot be ruled out and often dominates the presentation of historical events, for example, the Greek-written book of 2 Maccabees is a work that can be defined as a theological reflection on history which also preserves some valuable historical data. In general terms, Jewish stories from the Second Temple Period demonstrate a complex combination of two basic elements, narrative and theological, obscuring a straightforward way of defining the concept of historiography and genre in Judaism. The complexity of this matter belongs to the broader discussion about language and culture: our modern scientific attitude is to stick modern labels to ancient societies and cultures, thereby simplifying the ancient 'sense of history' or 'literary sense'.

In the Jewish case, we can find that historical meaning never so much resided in generic labels including hymnology and liturgy nor in any specific textual mode. Narratives produce intertextual meaning as a result of the creation of new relationships between existing stories and the invention of new motifs and ideas imbedded in ancient or newly created stories. When *historiē* means 'rational research', Jewish exegetical tradition has produced in the process of *midrash* (literally 'search') a characteristic approach by a range of interpretive modes towards the search for existing and new notions of the sacrosanct biblical story. The orally transmitted narrative and legislative material, written down during the first centuries CE in what is now known as standard rabbinic works like the *Midrashim* and the *Talmudim*, deals essentially with facts of Jewish life and is coined in Hebrew *aggadah* (literally, 'story') and *halakhah* (literally, the 'ongoing' prescript or commandment). The *Aggadah* as the totality of rabbinic tale was considered by rabbinic and medieval Judaism as a true part of the revelation to the people of Israel of the Torah or Pentateuch, in itself a series of five biblical books in which the narrative and legislative components are strongly interwoven.

Granting the afore-mentioned problems, uncertainties and ambiguities, one has to treat all this literature within a historical framework. In Judaic studies usually the dates of the Second Temple Period are accepted for the late biblical and post-biblical writings. For the inclusion of the formative period of rabbinic Judaism one has to set a concluding date at the end of Late Antiquity until the Arab conquest early seventh century. There is no lack of narrative material in

Hebrew and other languages such as Aramaic and Greek, and still much research has to be done by gathering and examining a wide range of stories and versions of stories that were widespread among the Jews living in the Diaspora. The corpus of Jewish narrative fiction includes the noncanonical literature of postbiblical Judaism (Greek and Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Apocalypses, Qumran texts, Josephus, Philo and other Jewish-Hellenistic literature) and of rabbinic Judaism (aggadic traditions from the extensive *Midrash* literature, the *Mishnah*, and the *Talmudim* of Babylonia and Palestine). The distribution of this literature into genres or subgenres and periods or schools, and the application of any literary criterium for its aesthetical and rhetorical values and purposes are dependent on modern judgments. Rabbinic narrative tradition has received enormous attention by modern scholarship, and much has been accomplished, especially in the field of aggadic folklore and folktale. The main point is that a broad acquaintance with the dynamics of narrative fiction in Judaism and in other Semitic cultures will enrich all the researchers in these and related disciplines. As a first step, a bibliographic database of source-material and relevant secondary literature will directly prove to be of considerable value. The characteristics of ancient Jewish stories can best be identified by toying with their affinities to a catalogue of themes and motifs, linguistic and generic features, story patterns and intentions. Crucial for the evaluation of ancient Jewish narrative is to understand it as a literary and multidimensional art-form, and it may well be that the insights gained thereof will prove to be useful to all those who are involved in the Ancient Narrative Project.