

common English names along with the different vernacular names; and the locations where each plant grows in India and the rest of the world. Descriptions of plants are also given, which are complemented by 80 line drawings and 28 photographs that help the reader become more familiar with the different plant species. The botanical names given are based on the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN) and are up-to-date with the latest taxonomic literature. For many of the plant species, details are given about their biological properties and their important chemical components.

In chapter 5, cross-reference formulations of a plant's applications for common diseases are provided. Also provided in this chapter are the relevant remedies, preparations, and dosages used in households and by local medicine men and rural practitioners. Though many of the formulations and prescriptions listed may be widely practiced, the attested efficacy of them needs to be validated through scientific study.

This book will be a handy reference for the general reader and no doubt be useful for teachers, students, researchers, and community health practitioners. The book should stimulate readers to appreciate more the resourcefulness of mankind and should help us sustain life on earth.

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### MIDDLE EAST

YASSIF, ELI. *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*. Folklore Studies in Translation. Translated by Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. xvii + 560 pages. Bibliographic references, index. Cloth US\$59.95; ISBN 0-253-33583-3.

The ambitious series "Folklore Studies in Translation" already includes English translations of many important and well-known works that were originally written in German, Lithuanian, Swedish, Finnish, and other languages. Added to this series in the year 1999 was Eli Yassif's *The Hebrew Folktale*, an extraordinary book that chronologically describes the transmission of the folk narrative from the Biblical period to the contemporary period of modern Israel.

Eli Yassif is a professor of Hebrew literature and Jewish folklore at Tel Aviv University. He is the founder of Jewish folklore studies at Ben-Gurion University in Israel and has been a visiting professor at prominent universities and institutions. Among his many books are *Jewish Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, 1986) and *Judah (Yudel) Rosenberg—The Golem of Prague and Other Tales of Wonder*, (E. Yassif ed., Jerusalem 1991).

In *The Hebrew Folktale* Eli Yassif fulfills an almost impossible task: to analyze a phenomenon that is ephemeral in its nature, and to follow it throughout the centuries. He is able to do this, as Dan Ben-Amos observed, "by breaking down the dichotomy between orality and literacy." Yassif studies the orality within the written tradition on the basis of a historical method. However, as the author stated, the orientation of the monograph is not historical, but generic because the main goal of the book is "exploring and understanding the social function and cultural meaning of the Hebrew folktale.... [And] it strives to define and emphasize the place of folk creativity in Jewish culture."

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part contains the authentic folkloric

sources. It allows the reader to go through the representative texts of Hebrew oral tradition from the Biblical period up to the present time. Yassif presents the texts of each genre and major theme in the Jewish folk literature. This first part of the book is devoted to all readers interested in Jewish culture. The second part, "Notes," describes each source in detail as well as the scholarly discourses on the methodology and interpretation of the texts analyzed.

In the first chapter, "Introduction," Eli Yassif explains his concept of a Hebrew folktale, which is distinct from a Jewish folktale. Firstly, the author determines what is a Hebrew folktale on the basis of linguistic criteria. Hebrew was the language of communication, therefore the Jewish folktales from previous periods—the written texts—are available in this language. The author's second argument is cultural. Yassif claims that culture underlines the central role of Hebrew, which is not just the day-to-day language of the Jews but is also their language of cultural communication that has existed throughout the whole of Jewish history. Therefore any oral and written text (especially a folktale) can be analyzed as an important component of Jewish culture.

In the second chapter Yassif examines the folktale in the period when the Bible was being written. This period covers more than a thousand years of Jewish culture. The main model of analysis chosen by the author is generic, which, as Yassif accurately states, allows one to study the biblical folk narrative in the context of an international (folk) repertoire. The focus of his research is on patterns, themes, and social functions of the folktale. The inclusion of the oral folktale into the Hebrew Bible, in written form, brought essential changes in the form, content, and function of the narrative. The main change was its didactic orientation, which the author specifically associates with this period.

The third chapter focuses on the second temple period, which represents around five hundred years of Jewish history. The author uses different apocryphal and pseudepigraphal texts as sources for his folktale research. The reader can follow the development of four new genres of the period: namely, the martyrological tale, the expanded Biblical tale, the framework narrative, and the magic fairy tale. The first two are defined as being of Jewish origin and as being characteristic of this period. Special attention is given to tales of survival. Analyzing these texts, the author gives a persuasive description of the folk narrative tradition, its special content, and its role for the Jews while living in exile and in diaspora.

Eli Yassif discusses the folktale in the rabbinic period in the fourth chapter. The material is classified not only under general categories of genre but also under characteristics and functions of the texts. Using a methodological approach, the author is able to present the material in the general cultural context of the time and is also able to discuss the worldview that was prevalent in this cultural context.

The medieval era is depicted in the fifth chapter. Two tendencies brought about fundamental changes in Jewish culture and particularly in its folktales. The first was the Muslim conquest (second half of the seventh century), which separated the Jewish communities in Christian Europe from those under Islamic rule. The second was the separation of the disciplines, which resulted in the Talmudic literature being displaced from its previous central position, and which led to the creation of special works on subjects such as philosophy, poetry, and history. The author describes the vanishing of some traditional genres (e.g., myth, animal tales) and the emergence of new ones, and then depicts a comprehensive image of the medieval oral narrative repertoire.

The final section of the book is devoted to the folktale in confrontation with a changing world. In the first part of this final section the author writes about the role of the folktale in the Hasidic movement prior to World War II. He discusses especially the circulation of oral and written tales in this context, the traditional narrative patterns, the absorption of medieval narrative traditions, and their role in the Hasidic story. In the second part, the reader can learn

about the place of contemporary folk literature in modern Israel. Yassif focuses his attention upon the revival of Hebrew oral traditions and shows the process by which the traditional narratives are included into the current oral repertoire. The author's ideas are discussed in comparison with examples of legends about saints. Yassif's interpretation of these texts and their functions in the modern world is fascinating. It offers a persuasive image of a society that is at a crossroads between modernity and tradition.

The book fulfills Yassif's goals perfectly: it gives an extraordinary overview of Hebrew folk narratives as well as their themes, genres, and functions in Jewish culture past and present. It shows an understanding of oral traditions as social products and analyzes them in concrete historical, cultural, and social contexts. Moreover, it discusses the general issues pertinent to folklore studies such as the relationship between oral and written literature, the development of genres over the centuries, the role of folktales in the modern world, and the transmission of narrative patterns. This book should therefore attract a wide audience as a source for understanding the place of folk creativity in any culture.

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