

Dan BEN-AMOS and Emmanuel BIN GORION, editors, *Mimekor Yisrael: Selected Classical Jewish Folktales* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1990, Pp. xiii + 271)

Martin Lovelace

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to the content of the stories, but the volume ought to have included an explanation of why, apart from financial gain, this 1916 book should be presented in 1990.

Lisa PHILIPS VALENTINE
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

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I was frustrated by this work which I found neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring and thus an anomaly, if not quite one of the abominations of Leviticus. My perplexity derives from a questionable decision by the publisher to offer the general reader a selection from the much larger, three-volume, compilation *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales* (Indiana UP, 1976), but furnished only with a three page introduction and brief headnotes by Dan Ben-Amos. The publisher's blurb on its cover also announces a new "scholarly edition" of *Mimekor Yisrael*, prepared and annotated by Ben-Amos, for those with an "in-depth" interest in Jewish history and folklife. I have not yet been able to see the scholarly version, so let it be clear that this review speaks only of the selected edition intended for those with just a passing interest in Jewish "exempla".

Perhaps there is such a readership. They would need more help that they are given, however, by the cogent but too brief introduction and headnotes, to fully appreciate these richly faceted, culturally resonant narratives. The stories were compiled as an anthology from a variety of sources — medieval narrative collections, chapbooks, literary versions of fables — by Micha Joseph bin Gorion (1865-1921), an East European scholar and author. They show the diversity of oral and written sources, from Jewish and non-Jewish folklore, which made up a body of instructive, inspirational, and entertaining folk literature which ran in conjunction with official Jewish religion. The compilation as a whole, even to judge by this selected edition, is a massive achievement of great interest to the narrative scholar because there are so many parallels to international folk-tale and legend tradition. It is all the more frustrating as with this rich body of tales we are not given sufficient interpretation or commentary, despite having at our elbow, in Dan Ben-Amos, a guide who could have said much more about

each text. His restraint is palpable. Terms like “mezuzah” and “tannaim” go unglossed, making the cultural and religious background of the tales unnecessarily impenetrable. There are no comparative notes, only allusions to likeness to “international tales”, which makes me wonder if folklorists have become embarrassed to admit to knowledge of type and motif indexes.

But this selection is for the general reader, the publisher will argue. I think the non-specialist needs more help, not less, in order to appreciate the folk literature of another culture and should be credited with a greater willingness to deal with the principles and methods of a particular discipline. A comparison with one of the better volumes in the *Folktales of the World* series, for example (perhaps Hasan M. El-Shamy’s *Folktales of Egypt*), shows what can be done through a combination of foreword, introduction, headnotes, comparative notes, and indexes (general, motif, and tale-type) to give the non-native reader a sense of having gained some understanding of a culturally different narrative tradition. *Mimekor Yisrael*, by comparison, is simultaneously too esoteric (for non-Jewish readers) and too generalist (for folklorists).

If the publishers judged the readership for this book to be mainly a Jewish one that does not need much cultural explanation, then an unfortunate underestimation of literary references was made. We meet Asmodeus, king of demons, the great fish Leviathan and the beast Behemoth; we see Judith cutting off the head of King Seleucus, not Holofernes. We also get a powerful sense of a beleaguered people under constant threat from other races and faiths, and from within their own faith by the various temptations to sin, and from the delusions and entrapments of demons whose supernatural world runs parallel to the human world and dangerously close. There is so much here that is so directly comparable to European folk tradition at large, that I wish the publisher had given us “general readers” the chance to read more of the kind of folkloristic annotation a scholar of Ben-Amos’s erudition could have provided.

I hope that I have not developed that ultimate folkloristic perversity — preferring to read annotations than the tales themselves — but in this case I could wish for fewer texts and more commentary from Dan Ben-Amos as our guide into this fascinating collection of folk literature.

Martin LOVELACE
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John’s, Newfoundland
