

society demands from everyone, whether man or woman.⁵² Jews of old were a gay and sociable people, sometimes inclined to merrymaking in their social gatherings. Their group entertainments showed, therefore, the same moral defects which are found all over the world among the masses. The prophets and sages of Israel denounced the revelry of the feasts and the vulgar character of the entertainment of those who were uncultured. The rabbis even went so far as to disapprove of all parties which are not for the sake of a *mizvah*. At the same time, however, the rabbis prized highly those forms of sociability (hospitality, friendship, weddingfeasts, etc.) which signify sympathy with, and esteem for, one's fellowman, and were stamped with a dignified character.

*Judaism, vol 26:3 (1977):
367-374*

The Mysterious Book of Jasher

ARTHUR A. CHIEL

REBECCA GRATZ, OF PHILADELPHIA, AND HER sister-in-law, Maria Gratz, in Lexington, Kentucky, were women of grace and considerable culture, and their correspondence, which extended over two decades, reveals that they had much in common.¹ Mutual interest in family affairs, in social issues of their time, and in literature found continuous expression in the letters which passed between them from 1819, when Maria married Rebecca's brother, Benjamin, until 1841, the date of Maria's untimely death.

In late August, 1840, it was the *Book of Jasher*² which engaged Rebecca's and Maria's attention.³ Translated, for the first time, from Hebrew into English, the *Book of Jasher* had recently been published in New York by Mordecai M. Noah.⁴ With the characteristic enthusiasm which he brought to all of his enterprises, Noah acclaimed the antiquity and historic significance of this work. Maria was very much taken with the *Book of Jasher*, but what did Rebecca make of it, she was eager to know. In response, Rebecca offered her evaluation.

"There is a portion of it very agreeable to me," Rebecca wrote to her sister-in-law, "but so many improbable histories and some impossible exploits entirely destroy its credibility." The *Book of Jasher* was, in her estimation, a rather extravagant chronicle of Bible characters. She confessed to Maria that she had had much higher expectations for the book. A certain Hebrew scholar of her acquaintance had promised her great satisfaction with this work, but, having read it, she was rather disappointed. The role of Satan in the life of Abraham, for example, Rebecca found shocking. The treatment of Joseph, as compared with the original Biblical story, she judged to be inferior, if not spoiled. As for the delineation of Moses, the many adventures linked to his career altogether marred the straightforward Bible characterization of him.

1. *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, ed. Rabbi David Philipson, D.D. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1929).

2. Rebecca and Maria Gratz were discussing the recently published *Book of Jasher*. We use this title throughout the article, except when we refer to the original Biblical work, where we use the title *Sefer ha-Yashar*. (A halakic work of the twelfth century by Rabbenu Tam, and a musical work by an anonymous author of the thirteenth century, are both titled *Sefer ha-Yashar*).

3. *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, pp. 280-282.

4. Isaac Goldberg, *Majot Noah: American-Jewish Pioneer* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1944), pp. 243-246.

"I found it impossible, as I proceeded in the work," continued Rebecca, "to class it anything other than an old romance." And she was close to the mark in her critique. "One cannot but wonder," she wrote, "that the author or his translator, could expect it would ever pass for the veritable book of Jasher referred to in the Scriptures." Rebecca Gratz's reservations about the antiquity and authenticity of the *Book of Jasher* were well founded. Unknown to her, this work had troubled others, too, before her time and in other places.

The *Sefer ha-Yashar* is twice mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible. The first reference is to be found in Joshua 10:13 where, in summary of Joshua's poetic address to the sun and the moon, the text reads: "Is not this written in the *Sefer ha-Yashar*?" The second reference, in 2 Samuel, 1:17, as introduction to David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, reads: "Behold it is written in the *Sefer ha-Yashar*." The word *yashar* means: one who is straight, honest, righteous, upright. It was traditionally assumed that the title referred to historical, heroic figures of the Biblical period who were the subjects of this work.⁵

Yet the actual character of the ancient *Sefer ha-Yashar* remains uncertain. Some scholars have theorized that it was a written collection begun in pre-monarchic Israel and that it was subsequently expanded. Others have suggested that it was a compilation of oral tradition of a very much later period. Possibly, it was part of sacred literary archives begun during the monarchic period to preserve some of the epics of Israel. With such obscurity attached to the original, then, it can be seen why the mysterious *Sefer ha-Yashar* could eventually give rise to pseudographical identifications and imitations of it. Two such works are here the focus of our attention. The first is a creation of the eleventh century, an Aggadic work in fluent, Biblical Hebrew; the second is an English product of 1757 which was not at all related to the Hebrew work, except in name.

For a legendary account of the origins of the first *Book of Jasher* we are indebted to Joseph ben Samuel of Fez, the editor-publisher of the printed Hebrew edition of Venice, 1625.⁶ Whether these legends were the figment of Joseph ben Samuel's fertile mind or whether they were transmitted to him is not known. Whatever the case, in the preface, Joseph ben Samuel

5. With regard to the title, *Sefer ha-Yashar*, the term occurs in the Septuagint on 1 Kings 8:53, which has no Hebrew counterpart. The Septuagint refers to *biblia to oden*, "The Book of Song," evidently reading or interpreting the title as meaning *Sefer Hashir*. Some scholars, incidentally, so interpret the two Hebrew references to this early source. I, myself, interpret *yashar* from the meaning "strong, powerful," and render the title *Book of Heroes*. (R.G.).

6. B. *Avodah Zarah*, 25a: "Which is the Book of Jasher?"—said R. Hiyya b. Abba in the name of R. Johanan: It is the book of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are designated as righteous. . . . R. Eleazar said: It is the Book of Deuteronomy. . . . R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: It is the Book of Judges. . . ."

7. There may have been an earlier Hebrew edition in Naples in 1532. See Lazar Goldschmidt, *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Berlin: Verlag von Benjamin Harz, 1923). Also: Kirpat Sefer, 49 (1973-74): 242-244, where Joseph Dan discusses the question of the Naples edition.

presents two equally dramatic tales about odyssey of the *Book of Jasher*. The first of these relates to Titus' taking of Jerusalem; the second is tied to the Septuagint translation of the Pentateuch during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in the third century B.C.E.

At Titus' conquest of Jerusalem, according to the first tale, * Sidrus, a ranking Roman officer, confiscated for himself one of Jerusalem's impressive residences. He found that mansion laden with treasures, among them

a cask full of various books of the Law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, also books of the kings of Israel, and the kings of other nations as well as many other books of Israel, together with books of the Mishna adopted and established; many scrolls were also lying there. . . ."

And, in the midst of this collection, Sidrus found a gray-beard Hebrew scholar with whose erudition the Roman was impressed. He proceeded to take the library, and conscripted the aged man to be the caretaker of the precious collection.

Eventually assigned to distant Sevilla, in Spain, the Roman general took with him his Jerusalem treasures along with the venerable Hebrew. Thus were these volumes and scrolls transferred to Europe. Many centuries later, when Naples came under Spanish rule, this library of Hebrew, or some part of it, was moved to that Italian city. In summary of this tale, the publisher of the first printed Hebrew edition writes:

Now this book [*Sefer ha-Yashar*] is the best and most valuable of all, and of this book twelve versions have reached us, and we searched in them and found them all of one copy, there was no difference, nothing added and nothing deficient, nor any alteration in letters, words or events, for they were all alike, one version.⁸

Having offered this testimony about the travels of the *Book of Jasher* from Jerusalem to Spain in the first century, and of its eventual transfer to Naples in the fifteenth, Joseph ben Samuel leaps back in time, to the era of Ptolemy II, in the third century B.C.E. Determined to make his Alexandria library the most comprehensive in the Greek world, Ptolemy Philadelphus had dispatched a learned delegation to Jerusalem, to secure the Hebrew *Book of the Law*. But though Jerusalem's religious leaders might have been flattered by Ptolemy's request, they were reluctant to entrust a copy of their most sacred document to a pagan potentate. In its place, they sent to him the *Book of Jasher*. Initially, unaware that a substitution had been made, Ptolemy accepted this work of the Hebrews with satisfaction. But, after a time, his learned advisors alerted him to the fact that the Hebrew document in his possession was not the *Book of the Law*. Whereupon Ptolemy sent a second delegation to Jerusalem, now inviting

8. *Book of Jasher* (New York: Hermon Press, 1972), pp. xv-xvi. This is the most recent reprint of the Noah publication of 1840.

9. Ibid.

seventy of their elders to come to Alexandria, where, on their arrival, he "placed them in seventy houses that each should write the *Book of the Law*." At last, Ptolemy's wish was implemented. For, guided by the divine spirit, the seventy scholars separately transcribed for him seventy scrolls; they were all of one version, without addition or diminution. Ptolemy now had, in his great Alexandrian library, two of Israel's prized works, the *Pentateuch* and the *Book of Jasher*.

With these Ptolemy and Sidrus tales Joseph ben Samuel of Fez set his claim for the antiquity of the *Book of Jasher* and also related its odyssey beyond Jerusalem. In addition to which, this imaginative 17th century publisher proposed thirteen good reasons for readers to purchase his newly-printed volume, not the least being its "helpfulness to every person lecturing in public" and as an inspiration for "all merchants and travelers who have not the time to study the Law."

Joseph ben Samuel's hopes for the popular acceptance of the *Book of Jasher* were fulfilled beyond his expectations, and his Venice edition of 1625 proved to be the precursor to many that followed. The work was reprinted successively in a variety of places: Cracow, 1628; Prague, 1668; Frankfurt-am-Main, 1706; Amsterdam, 1707; Grodno, 1795; Lemberg, 1816. It was translated into Yiddish and published by Jacob ha-Levi in 1674. The Christian-Hebraic scholar, Johann G. Abicht, translated the *Book of Jasher* into Latin and published it at Leipzig, in 1732, with the title, *Dissertatio de Libro Recti*.

The *Book of Jasher* proved a "best-seller," and for good reasons. It was an imaginative work, written in elegant Biblical style; it was a flowing, connected narrative which appeared to resolve some puzzling sections of the *Pentateuch*.¹⁰ Above all, it entertained the reader by freeing the imagination in romantic directions. For the serious halakic student the *Book of Jasher* was a pleasant escape; for the non-erudite reader it was a journey into ancient Hebrew epic. An overview of the book's contents is worth our attention.

The *Book of Jasher* begins with the events leading up to Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. The Biblical story (Genesis 4:8) relates that Cain was wroth with Abel over God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and the rejection of his own. The text then shifts quickly to the murderous encounter of the brothers in the field. The Genesis story is economical, suggestive, while the *Book of Jasher* elaborates the Cain-Abel transaction substantially, including a heated dialogue between the brothers that leads, finally, to the fratricide.

Similarly, the life of Abraham is described at length, the account beginning with his birth and the appearance of the bright star (8:1-35), and including numerous details, such as two journeys to his son, Ishmael (21:22-48). The same minuteness is displayed with regard to the last days of Sarah and her funeral which, according to the *Book of Jasher*, was attended by Shem, Eber, Aner, Eshkol, Mamre and the Canaanite kings, complete with retinues (22:41-44). The doctrines which the three Patriarchs received through Shem and Eber are given considerable attention. The life of Joseph is portrayed in a particularly expansive manner, and especially poignant is the scene of the young man, as part of the Ishmaelite caravan, passing by the grave of his mother, Rachel; she assuages his sorrow, assuring him his eventual redemption (42:30-40). Joseph's later temptation by Potiphar's wife is presented in a grandly elaborate manner.

In connection with the blessings which Jacob gave to his sons before his death, the *Book of Jasher* depicts the protracted warfare waged between the sons of Jacob and the kings of Canaan because of the rape of Dinah, with the war ending in victory for Israel (34-35). The history of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt and their eventual exodus are interwoven with a variety of legends. The Song of Joshua, which is merely alluded to in the Biblical book (Joshua 10:13) is given in the *Book of Jasher* as a complete poem (79:1-22). The book ends with the death of Joshua and the succession of the Judges. In total, the *Book of Jasher* is a richly embellished story of the early part of Biblical history, from Adam to Joshua. Its author had resourcefully collected sundry legends and tales connected with events and persons of the early period and had woven them together with a skillfully constructed narrative.

The antiquity of the *Book of Jasher* went unchallenged until 1828, when, in early November of that year the *Bristol Gazette*¹¹ carried a story that Philip Rose, a publisher in that city, was soon to release a most remarkable volume, the *Book of Jasher*. The report indicated that this was the English version of an ancient Hebrew scroll discovered in Persia, in the eighth century, by the renowned English churchman, Alcuin. Alcuin, who had been summoned to France by Emperor Charlemagne to be his personal counsellor, had learned that the *Book of Jasher* was to be found in the royal Gazna library. He determined to make the perilous journey to that far-off Persian city, where, eventually, in return for heavy payment of gold, he was permitted to study the scroll for a period of three years, and to translate it into English. It was this one thousand year-old English translation that was now being published.

Next, on November 19, 1828, a letter appeared in the *London Courier*

10. Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, tr. and ed. by Bernard Martin (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972), Vol. I, pp. 186-187; Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1945), Vol. I, p. 421; Leopold Zunz, *Ha-derech ha-Yisrael*, ed. Albeck (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1947); Louis Ginsberg, *The Legends of The Jews* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1946), Vol. VII (Index), pp. 559-562.

11. I have reconstructed the Zunz-Samuel incident from *Gesammelte Schriften von Dr. Zunz* (Berlin, 1876), Vol. III, pp. 98-100, and the Translator's Preface, *Book of Jasher* (New York: Hermon Press, 1972), pp. x-xi.

over the signature of Moses Samuel,¹² a Hebrew scholar of Liverpool. He, too, had come into possession of the *Book of Jasher*, the Hebrew text; it had been brought to him by a Jew from North Africa. Moses Samuel went on to say in his letter that he was currently translating the work and preparing a critical edition of it. He conceded that, while certain later additions had been made to it, the core of this work was, indeed, very ancient—perhaps two thousand years old.

Within ten days of Moses Samuel's letter in the *London Courier*, a lengthy and learned epistle appeared in the *Berliner Nachrichten*. It was, in fact, a treatise suited to a scholarly journal. The *Book of Jasher* was there carefully analyzed and its origins were traced to the twelfth or, perhaps, the eleventh century. It was, in all likelihood, written in Spain by a talented Hebrew. "That period was rich in literary fabrications," concluded the German letter-writer, "the most notable example of this genre, the *Book of Zohar*." The signatory of the indignant response which appeared in the *Berliner Nachrichten* was none other than Leopold Zunz, the father of *Jüdische Wissenschaft*.

It can now be asserted that this 1828 debate was based on a comedy of errors. Zunz had, indeed, locked horns with Samuel over the *Book of Jasher*, the Hebrew Aggadic work; the *Bristol Gazette* story, however, related to an entirely different *Book of Jasher*. This one was the ingenious product from the pen of Jacob Ilive, a Christian deist,¹³ who, with his brothers, Abraham and Isaac, ran a quality printing establishment in London for several decades. The Ilives were exponents of a variety of non-conformist ideas and Jacob Ilive became a prolific writer of tracts in which he elaborated their views. In them he inveighed against the doctrine of eternal damnation, he favored a religion of nature, and he denied the divinity of Jesus. In 1751, Jacob created a sensation with the latest work which he brought off the family's London press, *The Book of Jasher*. In the title-page, he informed his readers that this book was "translated into English from Hebrew, by Flaccus Albinus Alcuinus of Britain, Abbot of Canterbury, who went on a pilgrimage into the Holy Land and Persia, where he discovered this volume, in the city of Gazna."

Ilive's *The Book of Jasher* consists of thirty-seven chapters which begin with the Creation story and extend to the rule of "Jasher, the son of Caleb who judged Israel in Shiloh." Jasher is represented as an adjutant of Moses, along with Joshua. But even a casual reading of this work reveals the book's real purpose: the rejection of Revelation. Jethro emerges as the

12. While it is obvious from the Translator's Preface to Noah's *Book of Jasher* that someone other than Noah had translated the work, the translator's name is not given. It was Zunz who found a brief sketch of Moses Samuel (Vol. XI, p. 24).

13. Walter Wilson, *The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches* (London: W. Button and Son, 1808), Vol. II, pp. 290-292.

"founding father" of Israel's law code. It is Jethro who convokes Moses and the seventy elders on Mt. Sinai where he instructs them about the governance of Israel. Here, then, was the real intent of *The Book of Jasher*: to challenge the credibility of the Pentateuch and to diminish altogether the role of Moses.

Jacob Ilive published *The Book of Jasher* in November, 1751. That it was a fabrication was quickly recognized, and in December of the same year, the *Monthly Review* of London had this to say about Ilive and his creation:

The publisher, in order to give sanction to this pretended *Book of Jasher*, refers to the mention made to such a book in Joshua x. 13, and Sam. i. 18. In both these references, says he, it is appealed to as a work of credit and reputation, and as such was at that time had in great esteem. But the work now published does not in the least appear to be the book referred to in the Scriptures; but a palpable piece of contrivance, intended to impose on the credulous and the ignorant, to sap the credit of the books of Moses, and to blacken the character of Moses himself. Hence it is no wonder that the editor or author has had the precaution to conceal his name. He has trumped up an idle story of the means by which the MS fell into his hands, which he relates in a prefatory epistle to a nameless earl. He has also prefixed a history of Alcuin's pilgrimage to the Holy Land, of the manner of his procuring a sight of the *Book of Jasher*, and the means by which he obtained permission to translate it into English. But the whole is so full of blunders, inconsistencies, and absurdities, that we think it beneath any further notice.¹⁴

For his efforts in the writing of *The Book of Jasher*, as well as for his radical tracts, Jacob Ilive was sentenced, in 1756, to three years imprisonment. But his *The Book of Jasher* continued to have a life of its own, and it was the news of its re-publication in 1828 which occasioned the Samuel-Zunz contretemps.

What was it that motivated Mordecai Manuel Noah, in 1840, to publish Moses Samuel's English translation of the Hebrew work? We can only surmise. On the basis of what is known of his career and of his writings, Noah was an ardent advocate of Israel reborn.¹⁵ He was a bold spokesman for the Jews of his day, while the *Book of Jasher* was an epic portrayal of ancient Israel in all her vigor. It would be good for the gentle world, to whom Noah appealed for support in redressing modern Israel's grievances, to read the *Book of Jasher*. It had stirred Noah; it might stir Christians, too, who were attuned to the Bible.

But, as is the fate of books, it evoked a varied response. Maria Gratz was intrigued; Rebecca Gratz was ambivalent. She found a portion of the

14. Cited in: Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Roberts, 1846), Vol. IV, p. 742.

15. Robert Gordis, "Mordecai Manuel Noah: A Centenary Evaluation," *The Early Jewish Experience*, ed. Abraham Karp (New York: American Jewish Historical Society and KTAV Publishing House, 1969), Vol. II, pp. 110-157.

Book of Jasher "very agreeable," but, on the other hand, she was troubled by the "impossible exploits." Rebecca Gratz was a genteel lady with strong rationalist inclinations; Noah, on the contrary, was the dreamer of a renewed Zion. Each, then, responded with a different sensibility and temperament. The *Book of Jasher* was clearly a book for the imaginative, and Noah was such a one. He felt it to be "a work of great antiquity and interest, a work that is entitled to a great circulation among those who take pleasure in studying the Scriptures." And so Noah published the intriguing *Book of Jasher* for the "pleasure" of his generation.

Die Goldene Medina

Review-Essay by DAVID J. SCHNALL

Zion in America. By HENRY FEINGOLD. Twayne, N.Y., 1974, \$12.95.

World of our Fathers. By IRVING HOWE. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, N.Y., 1976, \$14.95.

AMONG THE VARIOUS SOCIAL AND ETHNIC communities that constitute the United States, perhaps none is more prone to self-analysis and evaluation than the Jewish one. An enormous literature has been developed in which the American Jewish experience has been documented, organized, categorized and reshaped in social, political, economic and demographic analyses.

The recent bi-centennial brought with it a tendency toward still further reflection on the role and contribution of all the various groups herein resident, their hardships and debilities, no less than their successes. It is no surprise therefore, that America's 200th birthday should have witnessed the publication of two more volumes of American Jewish history. The one, *Zion in America*, by Henry Feingold, is a survey based upon essentially secondary documentation; the other, Irving Howe's *World of our Fathers* is a concentrated analysis of New York's lower east side.

Feingold, of the history department at Baruch College, has distinguished himself in the past through his interest in the Nazi destruction of European Jewry, especially as it was treated by the American diplomatic corps. In *Zion in America* he has presented us with a masterful text for the beginner, whether in an introductory course in American Jewish history, or in a leisurely attempt to learning more about this phase of Jewish history.

On his part, Irving Howe, Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York and editor of *Dissent*, has produced a volume which is a delight to scholar and layman alike. It documents in grand fashion many aspects of the migration of some two million East European Jews to these shores at the turn of the century. Using life in the lower east side as a prototype, the author describes an experience common to many American groups in most large cities around the country.

There are several themes which are common to both volumes and which deserve some mention here. Probably most notable is the process of Americanization. Sociologists have debated the question of whether white

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