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VCU Menorah Review

For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

Summer/Fall 2010 no. 73

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An Interpretation of the Valley of Bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

By Elihu Gevirtz

The hand of YHWH came upon me. *I thought I was alone, but God found me and placed his hand on me, telling me he was going to take me on a journey.* He took me out by the spirit of YHWH and set me down in the valley. *I was lifted up on eagle's wings by the spirit of YHWH and he set me down in the wilderness, where there was nothing familiar.* It was full of bones. *These were the bones of my grandparents' town; Volchin was its' name, in Belarus. The last remaining Jews of Volchin were rounded up by the Nazis one day in the month of Elul, 1942 and shot to death, one at a time, all five hundred of them. Babies murdered in front of their parents to add to the cruelty. And for this I created you?* He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. *YHWH was crying, tears running down the cheeks of HaShem, quietly weeping for his murdered children.*

He said to me, O mortal, can these bones live again? I, *trembling and stammering,* replied, Oh YHWH, *you who are infinite, unknowable, beyond what this mortal can understand,* God, *you to whom I whisper my most intimate prayers,* only You know.

And He said to me, *not Ezekiel, not Isaiah, not Micah, but you oh modern mortal,* Prophecy, *Prophecy* over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, *bones of your cousins, your aunts and your uncles, and the teachers and caretakers of your grandparents when they were young,* hear the word of YHWH! Thus said YHWH God to these bones: I will cause breath , *the same ruach, the same spirit that blew over the surface of the waters at the beginning of time, and the same breath that I breathed into the first human, Adam Kadmon,* to enter you, *you - bones, that once supported, carried, and moved human flesh through my created world,* and you shall live again. *You shall live again.*

I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, *and I will say the Kaddish for you, and your soul shall thus be elevated, and you shall live again and your soul shall be set free. You shall live in the memory of the Jewish people everywhere, and you shall live in the memory of the murderers and their children and their children's children for generations, and they shall remember what is reaped from the seeds of hatred that are sewn by dishonor.*

And you shall know that I am YHWH *the eternal, unknowable one. And you shall know that though you died a cruel death, that your souls live on, engaged in the matter of living, of engaging, of wrestling with the will to do goodness and of temptation to do otherwise. And you shall know that you have a job to do – to speak to us – the living. Whisper to us when we are lost and confused – whisper to us when we have nowhere to turn, no elder to ask – and guide us, show us the way toward righteousness. When we are angry, help us to choose kindness. When something isn't right, help us to be generous. When, we think we're right, help us to seek the truth, and when we are in power, help us to provide justice to all those within our borders.*

I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone. *Each person's bones were matched up to that person's own bones. The elements of their structures were re-united. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; Just as I commanded Moses to tell the artisans to build an ark having three layers: a layer of pure gold on the inside, acacia wood in the middle, and a layer of pure gold on the outside; I endow upon you, an inner layer that moves through space by contracting and releasing, a middle substance, and an outer of respiring protection.* but there was no breath in them.

Then He said to me, Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, O mortal! Say to the breath: Thus said YHWH God: Come, O breath, from the four winds, *from each of the corners of the earth – the body of the divine*

-, each from a different sephira, emanating its own light toward these bodies, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again.? I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude. Nearly five hundred rose.

And He said to me, O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed ; *doomed to being bound up in the earth in which we laid down. Our souls are bound to our end and cannot begin anew again. Say Kaddish for our souls so that we may be elevated and do our holy soul work.* Prophecy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said YHWH God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel. *Not just your souls, but your bodies too. You will return from despondency and death to your ancient homeland and life.*

You shall know, O My people, that I am YHWH, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. *It's reciprocal; God and Humanity - we need each other.* I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. *There, in the land of milk and honey, you will fly from blossom to blossom.* Then you shall know that I YHWH have spoken and have acted – declares YHWH. *Then YHWH and his people will be re-united, and the milk and the honey will flow.*

(The original text of Ezekiel is in standard font. The text that I've added is in italics.)

*Elihu Gevirtz is a Rabbinic Student at the Academy for Jewish Religion
- California*

Books in Brief: New and Notable

The Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History by Ian J. Bickerton

The University of Chicago Press

Though more than 60 years have passed since the signing of the proclamation of the State of Israel, the impact of that epochal event continues to shape the political policies and public opinion of not only the Middle East but much of the world. In this timely volume, military historian Ian J. Bickerton cuts through the complex and emotional arguments in order to explain this struggle in objective detail, describing its history from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire to the present day. In concise and clear prose, he argues that the present problem can be traced to the fact that each side is trapped by a conception of their past from which they seem unable to break free. He emphasizes that, ultimately, the use of force has not, and cannot, resolve the issues that have divided Israelis and Arabs. He also provides an explanation of how Israel and Palestinians have reached this point as well as a path showing a way forward towards peace.

Jews in Nazi Berlin: From Kristallnacht to Liberation, edited by Beate Meyer, Herman Simon, and Chana Schutz

The University of Chicago Press

Drawing on an unprecedented collection of archival materials, the editors offer a collective history of the city's Jewish population, the largest in all of Germany. Painstakingly reconstructing the atmosphere of repression and danger that slowly overtook daily life in the years that followed Hitler's rise, the book interweaves documentary images with intimate first-person accounts and essays by leading scholars on such topics as emigration, Zionism, deportation, betrayal, and more. The multifaceted picture of struggle, resistance, resilience, and loss that emerges is both a memorial to a lost community and a crucial contribution to our continuing attempts to understand the Holocaust.

Is It Good for the Jews? More Stories from the Old Country and the New by Adam Biro

The University of Chicago Press

This sequel to *Two Jews on a Train* brings the lost world of Eastern European Jewish communities to unforgettable life, brimming with personality and spilling over with stories. Nagging parents, quibbling friends, disputatious rabbis who dare to argue with the Almighty—these familiar figures and many more play parts in Biro's absurd inventive tales, invested with his obvious love of Jewish idiosyncrasy and shot through with a wry fatalism. *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* by Elliot R. Wolfson. New York: William Morrow.

While most literature on Schneerson focuses on whether or not he identified with the role of Messiah, Wolfson concentrates on his apocalyptic sensibility and his promotion of a mystical consciousness that undermines all discrimination. For Schneerson, the ploy of secrecy is crucial to the dissemination of the messianic secret. To be enlightened messianically is to be delivered from all conceptual limitations, even the very notion of becoming emancipated from limitation. Wolfson articulates Schneerson's rich theology and profound philosophy, concentrating on the nature of apophatic embodiment, semiotic materiality, hypernomian transvaluation, nondifferentiated alterity, and atemporal temporality.

The Fifth Servant by Kenneth Wishnia

New York: Columbia University Press

Prague 1592: Emperor Rudolph II sits on the throne; the Papal Inquisitor has just arrived to persecute witches and heretics poisoning the word of Christ; and the city's Jews live behind the walls of the ghetto. When the body of a young Christian girl is found in a Jewish shop on the eve of Passover, a blood libel charge is brought against the shopkeeper, imperiling the relative tolerance enjoyed by the entire

Jewish community. With just three days to produce the real culprit, our hero, a young shames named Benjamin Ben-Akiva – teamed with the legendary, true-life figure of Rabbi Loew – must use his wits, inner strength, and knowledge of Jewish law to save the Jews of Prague.

The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches by Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman

New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press

This book is a lively, interdisciplinary collection of essays that addresses critically acclaimed worked in this subgenre of Jewish literary and artistic culture. Featuring insightful discussions of notable figures, the contributors focus on how graphic novels are increasingly being used in Holocaust memoir and fiction and to portray Jewish identity in North America, Europe, and Israel. This comprehensive volume is a compelling representation of a major postmodern ethnic and artistic achievement.

The Life of Gluckel of Hameln. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. Widely viewed as one of the earliest major published works written by a woman, this memoir has become a classic. Born in the Hamburg ghetto in 1646, Gluckel presents a compelling account of 17th century Germany and its Jewish community. Gluckel's aim in writing the memoir was to survive the long nights that tormented her after the death of her beloved husband, and to record a family history for her 12 children. The only English translation of Gluckel's story from the original Yiddish has been out of print for many years until this reissue from JPS.

Refuge Denied: The St. Louis Passengers and the Holocaust by Sarah A. Ogilvie and Scott Miller

Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press

The ordeal of the refugee ship St. Louis has become a symbol of the world's indifference to the plight of European Jewry on the eve of the Holocaust. In the spring of 1939, more than 900 Jewish refugees

boarded the St. Louis in Hamburg, Germany, hoping to escape escalating oppression by the Nazi government. Except for a small group that had special visas and was able to disembark in Havana, the ship and its passengers were denied entry by Cuba and the United States. Returning on an uncertain voyage to Europe, the refugees eventually were accepted by four western European countries. Other than the 288 sent to England, most once again fell under the Nazi grip that closed upon continental Europe a year later

Although the episode of the St. Louis is well known, the actual fate of the passengers, once they disembarked, slipped into historical obscurity. Prompted by a former passenger's curiosity, the authors set out to discover what happened to each of the 937 passengers. Their investigation, spanning 10 years and half the globe, took them to unexpected places and produced surprising results.

Capitalism and the Jews by Jerry Z Muller

Princeton University Press

Drawing on many sources from medieval Europe through contemporary America and Israel, the author examines the ways in which thinking about capitalism and thinking about the Jews have gone hand in hand in European thought, and why anti-capitalism and anti-Semitism have frequently been linked. The book explains why Jews have tended to be disproportionately successful in capitalist societies, but also why Jews have numbered among the fiercest anti-capitalists and Communists. The author shows how the ancient idea that money was unproductive led from the stigmatization of usury and the Jews to the stigmatization of finance and, ultimately, in Marxism, the stigmatization of capitalism itself. Finally, the book traces how the traditional status of the Jews as a diasporic merchant minority both encouraged their economic success and made them particularly vulnerable to the ethnic nationalism of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Inextricably Bonded: Israeli and Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture by Rachel Feldhay Brenner

Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press

In the tragic reality of continuing conflict between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs, this book affirms the insoluble ties between the two communities. The author examines how the literatures of both groups defy the ideologies that have obscured conversation between the two people. Her examination of Israel's literature demonstrates the impact of Zionist identification with the West on the formation of the Israeli cultural canon. Readings from Jewish writers such as Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, and David Grossman, as well as from Arab writers such as Atallah Mansour, Emile Habiby, and Anton Shammas provide new insights into Israeli-Arab relations.

Jesus in the Talmud by Peter Schafer

Princeton University Press

Scattered throughout the Talmud, the founding document of rabbinic Judaism, are quite a few references to Jesus – and they're not flattering. In this richly detailed and accessible book, Schafer examines how the rabbis of late antiquity read, understood, and used the New Testament Jesus narrative to assert Judaism's superiority over Christianity.

Though these stories are virulently anti-Christian – they mock Jesus' birth from a virgin, fervently contest his claim to be the Messiah, and maintain that he was rightfully executed as a blasphemer and idolater – Schafer contends that they betray a remarkable familiarity with the Gospels. The result is a deliberate and sophisticated parody of the New Testament narratives. A departure from past scholarship, which has discounted Talmudic stories of Jesus as unreliable, the author posits a much more deliberate agenda behind these narratives.

The Ladder of Jacob: Ancient Interpretations of the Biblical Story of Jacob and His Children by James L. Kugel

Princeton University Press

Rife with incest, adultery, rape, and murder, the biblical story of Jacob

and his children must have troubled ancient readers. By any standard, this was a family with problems. In this book, Kugel retraces the steps of ancient biblical interpreters as they struggled to reconcile the behavior of their ancestors with their own moral and religious values. Kugel reveals how they often fixed on some little detail in the Bible's wording to "deduce" something not openly stated in the narrative. They concluded that Simeon and Levi were justified in killing all the men in a town to avenge the rape of their sister, and that Judah, who slept with his daughter-in-law, was the unfortunate victim of alcoholism. Through careful analysis of these retellings, Kugel presents an artful, compelling account of the very beginnings of biblical midrash.

**Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker
by Sarah Stroumsa**

Princeton University Press

The author argues that Maimonides is most accurately viewed as a Mediterranean thinker who consistently interpreted his own Jewish tradition in contemporary multicultural terms. Maimonides spent his entire life in the Mediterranean region, and the religious and philosophical traditions that fed his thought were those of the wider world in which he lived. Stroumsa demonstrates that he was deeply influenced not only by Islamic philosophy but by Islamic culture as a whole, evidence of which she finds in his philosophy as well as his correspondence and legal and scientific writings. She begins with a concise biography, then carefully examines key aspects of his thought, including his approach to religion and the complex world of theology and religious ideas he encountered among Jews, Christians, Muslims, and even heretics; his views about science; the immense and unacknowledged impact of the Almohads on his thought; and his vision of human perfection.

Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism by Seth Schwartz

Princeton University Press

The author argues that Jewish social relations in antiquity were animated by a core tension between biblical solidarity and exchange-based social values such as patronage, vassalage, formal friendship, and debt slavery.

Schwartz's examination of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, the writings of Josephus, and the Palestinian Talmud reveal that Jews were more deeply implicated in Roman and Mediterranean bonds of reciprocity and honor than is commonly assumed. He demonstrates how Ben Sira juxtaposes exhortations to biblical piety with hard-headed and seemingly contradictory advice about coping with the dangers of social relations with non-Jews; how Josephus describes Jews as essentially counter-cultural; yet how Talmudic rabbis assume Jews have completely internalized Roman norms at the same time as the rabbis seek to arouse resistance to those norms, even if it is only symbolic.

This work is the first comprehensive exploration of Jewish social integration in the Roman world, one that poses challenging new questions about the very nature of Mediterranean culture.

Orthodox Jews in America by Jeffrey S. Gurock

Bloomington: Indiana University Press

The author has penned the first social history of Orthodox Jews in America from the first arrivals in the 17th century to the present. He examines how Orthodox men and women have coped with the personal, familial, and communal challenges of religious freedom, economic opportunity, and social integration. His riveting narrative depicts lifestyles of Orthodox Jews and uncovers the historical tensions that have pitted the pious against the majority of their co-religionists who have disregarded Orthodox teachings and practice. Exploring Orthodox reactions to alternative Jewish religious movements that have flourished in a pluralistic America, he illuminates controversies about the compatibility of modern culture with a truly pious life, thus providing a nuanced view of the most intriguing present-day intra-Orthodox struggle – the relationship of feminism to traditional faith.

**The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved & Why It Endures by
Nicholas Wade**

New York: The Penguin Press

In this original and thought-provoking book, the author traces how religion grew to be so essential to early societies in their struggle for existence that an instinct for faith became hardwired into human nature. As a force that binds people together and motivates individuals to put the interests of society above their own, religion encouraged moral behavior toward those within the group and aggression, when necessary, toward those outside it. Religion thus provided the earliest human societies with their equivalents of law and government. He then explores how religion was reshaped by culture to the very different needs of settled societies and how from these more social structured religions the three monotheisms arose. This first objective and non-polemical book of its kind examines both the weaknesses of modern religion and the strengths that account for the remarkable persistence of faith.

**Families, Rabbis and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in
Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe by Shaul Stampfer**

Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization

The essays collected in this book look at the past through the prism of the lives of ordinary people, with results that are sometimes surprising and always stimulating. The topics they treat are varied, but common to all of them is the concern to explain what lay behind the visible realities of family and community for East European Jews of the period; how children grew up and how they studied; how people married; and how they later negotiated such challenges as divorce, bereavement, remarriage, and caring for elderly parents. These areas of community life are always evolving, but in the 19th century the pace of change was exceptionally rapid. Stampfer deals with these social realities objectively and analytically. The result is a picture that is both honest and comprehensive.

Kings of the Jews: The Origins of the Jewish Nation by Norman Gelb

Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society

The author traces the evolution of the Jewish nation, forerunner of the modern state of Israel, through vivid accounts of the lives and times of the men and women who ruled it – from Saul to Agrippa II – in a Middle East even more turbulent than it is today.

A total of 52 men and two women served as monarchs between the years 1020 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. Their stories are told in this well-researched account. After Solomon died in 931 B.C.E., his realm was divided into Judah and Israel. For the next 109 years, each kingdom had 19 kings and, in addition, Israel had one queen. They fought with each other and with neighboring states; the rulers often came to a bloody end. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. and little is known about the fate of its inhabitants. The Jews of Judah, the Southern Kingdom, were exiled into Babylonia in 587 B.C.E., and upon their return became subjects of the Persians, then Greeks and Syrians, until the rebellion of the Maccabees. Maccabean rule was followed by the Hasmoneans, who gave way to Herod, king under the Romans, from 37 to 4 B.C.E. When the Romans conquered Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the Jewish monarchy finally ended.

This useful narrative recalls the contributions of Israel's monarchs and brings them back to life. Through their lives the reader learns how a resilient people survived division, conquest, and exile more than 2000 years ago to forge a vibrant identity that has lasted to the present day. Gelb makes Jewish history approachable to the modern reader.

Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth Century Eastern European Society by Iris Parush

Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press

In this extraordinary volume, Parush makes a paradoxical claim: she argues that because Jewish women were marginalized and neglected

by rabbinical authorities who regarded men as the bearers of religious learning, they were free to read secular literature in German, Yiddish, Polish, and Russian. As a result of their exposure to a wealth of literature, these reading women became significant conduits for Haskalah (Enlightenment) ideas and ideals within the nineteenth century Eastern European Jewish community.

Eva's Story: A Survivor's Tale by Eva Schloss with Evelyn Julia Kent

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company

Many know the tragic story of Anne Frank, the teen whose life ended at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. But most people don't know about Eva Schloss, Anne's playmate and posthumous stepsister. Though Eva, like Anne, was imprisoned in Auschwitz at the age of 15, her story did not end there. Together with her mother, Eva endured daily degradation at the hands of the Nazis. She survived the prison camps, but it would be decades before Eva was able to tell her survivor's tale.

Concluding with a revealing new interview with Eva, this moving memoir recounts – without bitterness or hatred – the horrors of war, the love between mother and daughter, and the strength and determination that helped a family overcome danger and tragedy.

Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity, and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity by Adiel Schremer

New York: Oxford University Press

The emergence of formative Judaism traditionally has been examined as a result of a competition between Christianity and Judaism in the first centuries of the Common Era. In this book, Schremer attempts to shift the scholarly consensus, instead privileging the rabbinic attitude toward Rome over their concern with the nascent movement. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 CE and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt combined to spur an intense identity crisis in Palestinian Jewish society – and, consequently, the formation of a new

"Jewish" identity.

Schremer gives particular attention to the rabbinic discourse of *minut*, equivalent to the Christian term "heresy." In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, the category of heresy took on new urgency as Palestinian rabbinic society sought to reaffirm and preserve its values and distinct Jewish identity. The rabbis re-established religious boundaries by labeling some Jews as *minim*, and thus placing them beyond the pale. The rabbinic discourse emphasized notions of social and communal solidarity and belonging; *minim*, accordingly, were Jews whose fault was seen in their separation from the rest of the Jewish community.

The place that Christianity occupied in rabbinic discourse was relatively small, and the early Christians, who only gradually were relegated to the category of *minim*, were not its main target. Relying on the recently scholarly acceptance of the slow and measured growth of Christianity in the empire up to and even after Constantine's conversion, Schremer minimizes the attention that the rabbis paid to the Christian presence. He goes on, however, to pinpoint the parting of the ways between the rabbis and the Christians in the first third of the second century, when Christians were finally assigned to the category of heretics. Yet, throughout late antiquity, he contends, the Roman Empire was the real "significant other" for Palestinian rabbis. The religious challenge with which they were most occupied was the Empire's power and the threat it posed to the belief in God's power and divinity.

The Life and Thought of Hans Jonas: Jewish Dimensions by Christian Wiese

Waltham, MA: Brandeis University

Hans Jonas (1903-1993) is one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Born in a German Jewish community in the Rhineland, Jonas' mentors included Husserl, Bultmann, and Heidegger. The committed Zionist fled Germany in 1933 for Jerusalem, fought in the British Army against Hitler, and then left Israel for North America in

1949. Much of Jonas' philosophy responds to contemporary historical and political challenges: mass society, totalitarianism, the Holocaust, "nuclearism," environmental devastation and, later, the risks of genetic engineering.

Christian Wiese's study examines how Jonas' Jewish background influenced his intellectual development. Wiese shows how philosophical ethics and Jewish identity were two inseparable aspects of his thinking, with the fight against Nihilism as the most important link. Drawing on a wealth of unpublished material and exploring momentous encounters with major figures of 20th century life and letters, like Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt, Wiese demonstrates how Jonas combined religious and philosophical elements in his thought, and offers new insights into the work of this eminent thinker.

Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews by Peter Longerich

New York: Oxford University Press.

This masterful history uses an unrivalled range of sources to lay out in clear detail the steps taken by the Nazis that would lead ultimately to the Final Solution. For this English translation, the whole of the original text was revised to take account of the latest scholarship in the field of Holocaust studies. Focusing closely on the perpetrators and exploring the process of decision making, Longerich convincingly shows that anti-Semitism was not a mere byproduct of the Nazis' political mobilization or an attempt to deflect the attention of the masses. Rather, from 1933 anti-Jewish policy was a central tenet of the Nazi movement's attempts to implement, disseminate and secure National Socialist rule – and one which crucially shaped Nazi policy decisions. Contrary to what has been believed in the past, the German populace responded relatively enthusiastically to Nazi anti-Semitism.

Crown of Aleppo: The Mystery of the Oldest Hebrew Bible Codex by Hayim Tawil and Bernard Schneider

Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America

Known by many simply as “the Crown,” the Aleppo Codex is the earliest known codex of the Hebrew Bible. Considered to be the most authoritative and accurate Masoretic biblical text, it is now treasured as one of the most important biblical manuscripts in all of Jewish history.

Completed by about 930, the Crown was created by exacting Tiberian scribes who took years to copy the entire Bible from parchment scrolls into book form, adding vowel and cantillation marks, and precise annotations as they worked.

Praised by Torah scholars for centuries, the Crown passed through many hands until the 15th century, when it found a safe home in the Great Synagogue of Aleppo, Syria. But when the synagogue was burned in the 1947 pogrom, the codex was thought to be destroyed, lost forever.

That is where its great mystery begins. Miraculously, a significant portion of the Crown of Aleppo survived the great fire and was smuggled from the synagogue ruins to an unknown location – presumably in Aleppo. Ten years later, the surviving pages of the codex were secretly brought to Israel and finally moved to their current location in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

This is the story of how, in medieval Israel, this masterpiece came to be, and how, hundreds of years later, it found its way back to its homeland.

Hebrew: A World of Its Own

***Hebrew Writers on Writing*, edited by Peter Cole in *The Writer's World Series* edited by Edward Hirsch. San Antonio: Trinity University Press.**

A review essay by Daniel Grossberg

Hebrew Writers on Writing is one volume in the series, "The Writer's World." The Series Editor, Edward Hirsch, describes the series as featuring writers from around the globe discussing what it means to write, and to be a writer, in many different parts of the world. The work presents a broad range of material and provides access for the first time to a body of work never before gathered in English.

A reading of one volume in the series in the light of another, rewards us multiply. We see the universality of the written word as it bridges chasms and binds humanity. We see, too, through contrasts and comparisons among the languages what is distinctive and distinguishing in the written word of different cultures. In order to draw attention to some points in *Hebrew Writers on Writing* and to better elucidate them, I make occasional reference to *Irish Writers on Writing*, ed. Eavan Boland.

Prominent and recurring in the contributions of the *Hebrew Writers* is a linguistic self-consciousness. A recognition that their medium is not like any other is a chief subject of consideration in the volume. Several contributors point to unique, often redoubtable and numerous aspects of Hebrew that pose formidable obstacles they constantly need to overcome as they write. Writers of the early modern period, for the most part, wrote in a language they did not speak; a language that was considered by many to be a "Holy Tongue" of divine provenance, a language used primarily for daily devotions. A defining trait of their medium and of Hebrew in our own day as well, is its long history and its synchronic nature. Its present time comprehends all of its four thousand year past. Writers today chose words and phrases from an

immensely rich range of linguistic and literary layers of the language. Virtually any phrase is likely to allude to a prior time or literary occurrence, whether intended by the writer or not. Peter Cole, editor of *Hebrew Writers...*, deemed the weight of Hebrew's past so heavy as to create a nearly intolerable burden for Hebrew writers. I would add that the literary challenge extends to the readers as well. And the ramifications do not end there.

Despite Israel's second place in the world, after Iceland, in book publications, in relative numbers, the number of writers and readers of Hebrew literature is small. According to one of the contributors, "a runaway best-seller in Israel, would sell only about eighty to one hundred thousand copies, and that's very rare." As a result Hebrew books need to be translated into other languages and cultures which poses a great challenge to the translator and to the target readership because of Hebrew's synchronic multi-layering.

Certainly it is not only Hebrew writers who are preoccupied with their medium and who are linguistically self-conscious. The New York Times Magazine of May 3, 2009 dedicated a feature article to Colm Toibin, an Irish novelist also included as one of the Irish Writers on Writing. Alex Witchel relates in that article Toibin's reaction to some raw material that his friend, the writer Robert Sullivan transmits to Toibin for the creation of Toibin's recent novel, *Brooklyn*: "He walked on, cloaked for a while, seemingly reciting his own rosary about feeling and language and writing. Finally, Sullivan told him that Sam was talking Gaelic, and he perked right up again. 'Do you know it has no single word for yes or no?' he said ... animatedly. The fact of it delighted him. For someone who has such little use for 'good' and 'bad' the very notions of 'yes' and 'no' are equally prosaic. Why bother with such useless extremes when all the really good stuff is in the middle?"

A reading of the *Hebrew Writers* in the light of *The Irish Writers* yields another interesting analogy. The Hebraists wrote in Hebrew; they treasured the old, dusted it off, and breathed into it a new life, albeit with the vestiges of the ages still an indispensable if not always desired

part of the medium. The Irish on the other hand, lost a language, they mourned the passing of Gaelic and never quite accepted the new one, English, through which, as Eavan Boland puts it," came all the humiliations history can offer a defeated people: The orders of the garrison. Injustice in the courts. The landlord's rent rules. The bailiff's shouted instructions to the battering-ram party."

Shulamit Hareven in "The Limits of My Language Are the Limits of My World" expresses the principle that every language is replete with concepts which are linked to a system of associations. The most important feature of Hebrew, she maintains, has to do with value concepts. "The synchronic Hebrew language holds certain precise ethical and philosophical value concepts that belong only to Hebrew and to Judaism and that are really untranslatable. Such words cannot be learned simply as words without their philosophical concepts. Some are whole teachings." Hareven decries the impoverishment of Hebrew culture when the Hebrew speaker loses the original meaning or at least the knowledge that there is such a meaning beyond some of these words and phrases. If the Hebraist merely takes the fraught Hebrew concept as a handy and shallow translation of an alien expression, then the speaker has erased one of the components of his culture. "We," laments Hareven, "end up speaking English or German in Hebrew words."

Peter Cole and Eavan Boland provide brief introductions to the writers represented in their respective works. These essays are uniformly insightful and provide the important historical and cultural context within which each appeared and in light of which each needs to be read.

I wonder, is the title, "... on Writing " too broad a heading or did the editors not choose the best excerpts to fit under that rubric? There is an annoying degree of diffuseness and an absence of a true unifying theme in both works, particularly, however, in Cole's volume. Most of the selections deal directly with the issue of Hebrew writing, but many are just too far afield and touch only tangentially on the topic. Cole also stretches the fair boundaries and includes selections of works

that were not written in Hebrew, but in Yiddish and German. Although Gabriel Preil penned poetry in Hebrew, his prose was in Yiddish and English. A prose essay of his, translated from the Yiddish, appears in the present volume. Gershom Scholem wrote primarily in German and in Hebrew, as well. Cole, however, includes in the book a meditation by Scholem translated from the German. If Cole had defined the theme more narrowly and judged the contributions more strictly the book would have had a greater coherence.

I am, as is Cole, "struck by the tremendous potency and variety of Hebrew Literature, but also by the fact that so little of what is richest about it is known beyond Israel's borders." This small volume might well provide one further step in repairing this sad state.

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How an Educated Elite May Have Shaped the Bible

Van der Toorn, Karel. *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

A review essay by Kristin M. Swenson

If *Menorah Review* were in the habit of giving stars to especially outstanding books, I'd lobby hard for *Scribal Culture* to have one. In *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*, Karel Van der Toorn, president of the University of Amsterdam, fleshes out an ancient world of literary development wildly unlike today's. Yet he does so in a way that makes sense to modern readers and makes sense of the process of the Bible's growth and development. But Van der Toorn isn't simply repackaging old theories; he is peddling something new.

Ideas that change the course of scholarship and plain old general thinking about some well-established matter such as the development of the Bible seldom happen without earlier itchings and inklings. That was true of the magisterial Documentary Hypothesis, which posits four different literary sources for the Pentateuch, made famous by Wellhausen but preceded by and building on the ideas of Graf and Astruc. And it's true again here. Yet Van der Toorn's careful examination of ancient scribal culture as crucial to understanding the Bible's development illuminates what recent scholars have suspected. The Bible grew out of a long process of telling, retelling, recording and editing by disparate individuals and groups both narrowly Israelite and with cosmopolitan experiences and perspectives. But *Scribal Culture* grounds that suspicion in real evidence that begins not with the text itself but with the people responsible for nurturing and shaping the text. It paints a colorful picture of the world of ancient scribes -- the ways that they worked, for whom, and why.

"Who wrote the Bible?" is how van der Toorn begins, cutting to the chase. In the face of what seems to be a Sisyphean task, given the trail of failures that precedes him, Van der Toorn lays a firm foundation

for answering the question. But rather than positing a particular individual or naming a specific committee(s) of Bible author-editors, conclusions that fail to satisfy because either they depend too heavily on select biblical witness (notoriously problematic for objective historical information) or employ outdated assumptions about the ancient world based on conjecture and fanciful reconstruction, with *Scribal Culture* Van der Toorn gets to the heart of the process itself.

With an introductory warning that in the world of the ancient Near East, books were not books *per se*, Van der Toorn prepares his readers' thinking and expectations to enable them to think less in terms of particular individual authors and more in terms of a process. Noting the fact that very few people before the Hellenistic period were literate, *Scribal Culture* casts new light on the role of oral traditions not just in keeping ideas alive for the community and the stuff of later literary traditions, but also in informing the way that things were written *in the first place* (to allow their oral performance).

Making use of resources not limited to ancient Israel but from cultures throughout the ancient Near East, Van der Toorn describes the "practice and perception of authorship in antiquity" (Ch. 2) and then tackles the challenge of establishing a concrete image of the identity and activity of scribes in the ancient world (using "comparative evidence" in Ch. 3, and "biblical evidence" in Ch. 4). Before submitting specific biblical texts to scrutiny for traces of scribal practice ("scribal culture in the mirror of Deuteronomy" in Ch. 6, and "the book of Jeremiah as scribal artifact" in Ch. 7), the author describes "scribal modes of text production" (Ch. 5). Finally, acknowledging the exceptional nature of the Hebrew Bible vis-à-vis other ancient Near Eastern texts as a document of enduring authority still today, Van der Toorn addresses the matter of revelation and the "scribal construct of holy writ" (Ch. 8) and concludes by discussing the "closure of the Hebrew Bible" in the book's last chapter, "Constructing the Canon."

In the face of the fact that the Bible's place in our world today as a source of continuing relevance and authority for believers and

consistently influential in pop culture makes it seem immediate and modern, Van der Toorn's book stands as a reminder that in order to truly understand it, one must appreciate the ways in which the Bible is ancient and foreign. The Bible didn't originate as a single book from a single hand in the way that Van der Toorn's book itself did. Rather, the select few who attained the education and skills of a scribe worked usually from their place in the temple on seldom-a-blank-page-scroll for other scribes who were equally well-educated, even cosmopolitan and multi-lingual. And that work was seldom a function of composing novelty at the initiative of a literary muse, but rather more the copying and editing in light of new experiences or different perspectives of traditions handed down and handed down again.

Van der Toorn notes six ways in which the ancient scribes produced "new" texts: 1) by transcribing oral traditions (and shaping them in the process); 2) by inventing truly new texts (Van der Toorn suggests that acrostics, and the books of Job and Qoheleth may be the product of such invention; 3) compilation of existing material such laws or oracles; 4) expansion of existing literature, sometimes directly into the text and sometimes se in the document's margins; 5) adaptation for a new audience, e.g. by translation; and 6) integration into a more comprehensive composition. The final product that is the Bible we have today was shaped by each of these techniques.

To create a document that could achieve authoritative status, scribes creatively wedded individual sources supported by different textual communities. Concerning the Pentateuch, Van der Toorn writes, "by writing a work that integrated documents with different ideas and perspectives, the scribes were creating a national written heritage that transcended earlier divisions" (141). The canon itself was the product of deciding to "promulgat[e] ... the Torah as the law of the land, issued by God, legitimized by the king, and enforced by Ezra and Nehemiah ... The second ... was the enunciation of the dogma of the prophetic era" (263). Rejecting later claims to prophecy as illegitimate, the scribes of Jerusalem were able to maintain their position of moral leadership.

Van der Toorn notes that the canon itself “is a triumph of scribal culture” because rather than the canon being a collection of texts that organically developed authority out of the greater community’s affinity with its content, the canon reflects the books of scribal tradition that also fit the criteria of antiquity. With the canon, then, the scribes transferred their own elite traditions, represented in written form, into the sphere and property of the entire community making those texts the cornerstone of national memory and identity.

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Moreshet: From the Classics

Rabbi Simlai's Summary of Judaism (3rd Century)

613 commandments were imparted to Moses, 365 negative (corresponding to the number of days in the year), and 248 positive (corresponding to the number of bones in the human body).

David came and reduced them to eleven. For it is written:

A Psalm of David. O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill? (1) He who walks blamelessly, (2) and does what is right, (3) and speaks truth from his heart; (4) who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his friend, (6) nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; (7) in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, (8) but who honours those who fear the Lord; (9) who swears to his own hurt and does not change; (10) who does not lend his money at interest, (11) and does not take bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved (Ps. 15.1-5).

Isaiah came and reduced them to six, for it is written:

(1) He who walks righteously (2) and speaks uprightly; (3) he who despises the gain of oppression (4) who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe, (5) who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, (6) and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil (Isa. 33.15).

Micah came and reduced them to three, for it is written:

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but (1) to do justice, (2) and to love kindness, (3) and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6.8).

... Isaiah came again and reduced them to two, for it is written:

Thus says the Lord: (1) Keep justice (2) and do righteousness (Isa. 56.1).

Amos came and reduced them to one, for it is written:

For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: (1) Seek me and live (Amos 5:4).

Talmud Makkot 24A

Saul Bellow to Cynthia Ozick on the Holocaust

January 1987

In part of a letter to Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow copes gropingly with the Holocaust

It's perfectly true that "Jewish writers in America" (a repulsive category!) missed what should have been for them the central event of their time, the destruction of European Jewry. I can't say how our responsibility can be assessed. We (I speak of Jew now and not merely of writers) should have reckoned more fully, more deeply with it. Nobody in America seriously took this on and only a few Jews elsewhere (like Primo Levi) were able to comprehend it at all. The Jews as a people reacted justly to it. So we have Israel, but in the matter of higher comprehension – well, the mental life of the century having been disfigured by the same forces of deformity that produced the Final Solution, there were no minds fit to comprehend. And intellectuals ... are trained to expect and demand from art what intellect is unable to do. (Following the foolish conventions of high-mindedness.) All parties then are passing the buck and every honest conscience feels the disgrace of it.

Speaking Otherwise: Form and Meaning in the Book of Ruth

By Janet Madden

The Book of Ruth is a story of law, identity and relationship, survival, desire and redemption; as its title reveals, it is a unified narrative of --- "is about"-- an eponymous character who decides to make a radical life-change and fully embraces who she is destined to be. Studying *Ruth* reveals that it is much more than simply a "charming and beautifully crafted short story in the finest traditions of Israel's faith" (Frick 469) or a Biblical *blidungsroman*. It is also a story that takes us to the heart of who this character is, and why, and, how she shapes an entire book of the Bible, a book read annually at Shavuot and associated by many with Ruth's acceptance of Torah and her acceptance into Israel – although, as Hayyim Schauss emphatically explains, "In none of the Books of the Bible is there any trace or mention of [Shavuot] in connection to the giving of the Torah" (87). Literally, Shavuot is established in *Exodus* as the "Feast of the Harvest, of the first fruits" (JSB 159) and "The Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest" (JSB 190), and, "since the 2nd or 3rd centuries of the Common Era" (Reinhartz 1579) Shavuot also "became the festival of the giving of Torah, of God revealing Himself on Mount Sinai" (Schauss 89). Revelation, then, is the connection between Shavuot and *Ruth*, between pilgrimage and harvest. Simply put, *Ruth* is a book in the sense that is a source of knowledge, a text simultaneously noetic, psychological and spiritual, since its events are ruled both by the laws of Israel and by a deep symbolic underpinning that moves the reader emotionally and explains why this story is so "beloved" (Zornberg).

Ruth herself has a special resonance for those who become Jews by choice, symbolizing as she does "the ideal convert to Judaism" (Reinhartz 1579). *Choosing A Jewish Life* relates stories of converts who chose Ruth as their Hebrew name because, they say, "it is she with whom I most closely identify" and "In every way I feel myself to be a descendant of Ruth" (qtd. in Diamant 93). This expressed emotional

and spiritual connectedness goes beyond a logical equation of conversion experience. Yet, the connection between Ruth, her story, and Shavuot is often regarded as simplistically obvious, as in *The Jewish Book of Why*, which makes the following connections: the story takes place in the Spring, Ruth was the grandmother of King David, and, according to Talmudic tradition, David was born and died on Shavuot, and because Ruth expressed her loyalty to Judaism, it is “proper to read the story of her life on Shavuot” (Kolatch 217). Like Abraham, to whom God speaks, telling him that if he will “Walk in My Ways” (Genesis 17:1), “kings shall come forth” from him (Genesis 17:6), for many readers, the plot of the story is identical to its theme: Ruth adopts the ways of Israel and, in consequence of, or, as a reward for, her choice, becomes the great-grandmother of David. But Ruth’s situation is quite different from Abraham’s. We never hear God speak to Ruth, and we hear no promises that are attendant upon her choice.

Like the connection with Shavuot, the plot of Ruth, which moves geographically, culturally, spiritually, chronologically and thematically, is assumed to be divinely choreographed. Yet, nowhere in *Ruth* do we see, or hear God, although virtually every character in the story affirms God’s power and presence. The movement of the plot from loss to gain, from fullness to emptiness to fullness, from Bethlehem to Moab to Bethlehem, from status to marginalization to status, certainly seems divinely orchestrated, a story of, as we say when we attempt to describe an epic, Biblical proportions. In terms of the actual narrative, however, *Ruth* is the story of widows and villages, not warriors and kingdoms. And although elements of this story, such as Ruth’s declaration of allegiance to Naomi and to Naomi’s God, and the genealogical appendix, might seem epic, *Ruth* is not the grandiose story of a king, as is, for example, its contemporary, the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh*. Nor is *Ruth* conveyed in the language of epic, an elevated poetic form restricted by metrics or rhyme. Unlike many other Biblical books, including some of those subsumed under the general rubric *Kethuvim*, *Ruth* is a narrative, a literary form that by its nature eschews the elevated tone and language of poetry and instead relies on communicat-

ing its content through prose, a term that generally connotes a direct and unadorned language that is related in an ordinary usage. The words “story” and “narrative” come from the Greek, and might be best understood as enigma, puzzlement, bafflement; thus, incorporated into the acknowledgment that *Ruth* is a narrative is the acknowledgment that stories are, at some level, mysterious and do not advertise their meanings—narratives are full of twists, turns, false expectations, errors, and meanings must be sought. Successful stories require tension and conflict. But, unlike classical drama or poetry, narratives, even classical narratives, do not require a particular, codified structure. There are no rules as to the number of words, characters or chapters that a narrative must have in order to be a narrative; stories have an elasticity of form and structure. The unrestricted nature of narrative is not inconsequential: Robert Alter perceptively notes that prose narration is an innovation of ancient Israel. It affords writers “a remarkable range and flexibility in the means of presentation” (26), permitting the creation of what Herbert Schneidau characterizes as a “world of linked analogies and correspondences” (qtd in Alter 26), yet expresses those ideas in familiar and realistic form and style.

It is instructive to consider how commentators on *Ruth* perceive the importance of its form. Kirstin Nielson begins her “Other Writings: *Ruth, Song of Songs, Esther, Daniel*” by characterizing *Ruth* as a “folk-tale?used as a defense of the claims of that [Davidic] family to political power” (173); in “Three Short Stories ? Women As Deliverers: *Ruth, Esther, and Judith*,” Frank S. Frick asserts that the Hebrew short story typically employs “fairy tale” elements with “an orientation that had the appearance of being historical” and “sociocultural lifelikeness” (16). Marc Zvi Brettler, in “Why Are You So Kind?When I am a Foreigner? Reading *Ruth v. Esther* ” argues that “good storytelling is the goal of the book” and that *Ruth* is “remarkably well formed from a literary” perspective. Brettler offers a plot synopsis: a “prominent rich man” meets a “worthy woman” and “they live happily ever after” (268), thus reducing *Ruth* to a familiar – and contextually reductive – formula.

Each of these commentators, then, points to the a-historical nature

of *Ruth*, the quality of familiarity and timelessness in its depiction of situations and relationships that transcends its Biblical *Sitz im Leben*. Frick observes that applying the theory of structuralism to a text can provide an avenue of textual interpretation that focuses on how that text has meaning for the contemporary reader (170). But a true understanding of the appeal of *Ruth* requires more than structural analysis. In terms of its literary form, *Ruth* might most accurately be defined as an allegorical narrative, a mode of expression that is, in fact, fundamentally religious, since allegories are stories that can be said to speak otherwise; that is, they are teaching stories, narratives that employ a-historical timelessness in order to convey deep psychological and spiritual truths to an audience. In the case of *The Book of Ruth*, Schneidau's concept of "linked analogies and correspondences" can usefully be considered in the context of the folk tale morphology of formalist Vladimir Propp. Applying Propp's simplified five-part analysis of function is especially useful for the modern reader of *Ruth*, since it does not merely provide insights into *Ruth's* structure--it also prompts the reader to carefully examine the narrative's extensive use of symbolism, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the richness of *Ruth's* many-layered meanings. As Mircea Eliade asserts, symbols do not "annul" the "material and specific validity of an object or action"; rather, in *Images and Symbols*, he maintains that "Symbolism adds a new value to an object or an act without violating its immediate or 'historical' validity?..everything is linked by a series of correspondences and assimilations" (qtd in Cirlot xvi). The notes to *Ruth* in *The Jewish Study Bible* indicate that names of the members of Naomi's family members "may have symbolic significance" and "describe, to some degree, the role or the fate of each character within the story," suggesting "that *Ruth* should not be viewed as a historical text" (1580). Viewed through a formalist lens, the nexus of form and function explains how a "beautiful" story of "simplicity" (Reinhartz 1578), is, in truth, something far more profound; it explains a deep undercurrent of meaning so powerful that even Brettler, a premier proponent of historical-critical Biblical reading, concedes that *Ruth* "should be read symbolically" (268).

The first of Propp's functions, and in his opinion, the "absolutely necessary function" (Luthi 130) is that there is a lack of something --- and, as Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg proposed in her shiur on Law and Narrative in *The Book of Ruth*, *Ruth* can be read as a "narrative in a state of lack." Lack is, of course, absence, deficiency, to be in need of something. And lack initiates this narrative. Set "in the days when the chieftains ruled" (JSB 1579) – a term that echoes the formulaic "Long ago" or "Once upon a time" – the story of *Ruth* begins, according to *The Babylonian Talmud, Bata Batra* 15b "in the days of judging the judges" (Zornberg), an historically "chaotic period" (Reinhartz 1579), an era of corruption and dissent during which competent and coherent governance was lacking. Thus, from its opening phrase, *Ruth* is also the story of "social disorder and the ensuing restoration of due order" (Warner 349), a restoration achieved through the birth of Obed and the genealogical list that concludes the narrative and reifies its significance to Judaism. Lack, however, is not simply a plot ploy to get the story moving. Lack is pervasive and threatening: the population of Bethlehem, ironically "the place of bread" (JSB 1580), is suffering from a famine.

Biblically, lack is frequently perceived as a divine test, as in *Job*, or as divine punishment, as in the destruction that prompts *Lamentations*. In this vein, *Ruth* opens with a further, even more crucial lack: the symbolically named Elimelech – "my God is king" (JSB 1580) – betrays the meaning of his name, his very self-hood, when he proves that he lacks both faith and integrity, leaving his famine-stricken city. According to *Ruth Rabbah* 1, 4, Elimelech is punished

Because he struck despair into the hearts of Israel? He was one of the notables of his place and one of the leaders of his generation. But when the famine came he said, 'Now all Israel will come knocking at my door [for help,] each one with his basket.' He therefore arose and fled from them.

Elimelech's aim may also have included saving his own family, but his sons, Mahlon and Chilion --- symbolically named "Illness" and

"Cessation"-- (Brettler 268) also are the recipients of the promise of *Deuteronomy* 8 to those who leave the ways of Israel: "you shall certainly perish ... because you did not heed the LORD your God" (385), for Elimelech's sons are the true sons of their father. They continue the lack of observance of the laws of Israel into the next generation by marrying prohibited Moabite women, a prohibition that does not result from mere exogamy, for the origins of Moab spring from the incest of Lot and his daughter. Further, as laid out in *Deuteronomy* 23:

No ... Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD; none of their descendents, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam ... to curse you (JSB 418-19).

Again symbolically, the lack of spiritual vigor of Naomi's sons finds physical expression in the lack of children – the symbolic future – in these marriages, both specifically, in their deaths and more generally, for a continued life in Moab, which Naomi no longer perceives as a place of refuge but of exile. For Naomi, too, although her name ironically, means "pleasantness" (JSB 1580) or "sweetness" (Brettler 268), suffers from lack – there is no sweetness in her life or in her character. The narrative provides no evidence that she had opposed the move to Moab, and so, she too is guilty of law-breaking; consequently, she lacks husband, sons, grandchildren, country, and hope for the future. She herself acknowledges that her lack is a punishment as she echoes *Job* : "the hand of the Lord has struck out against me" (JSB 1580), she tells her daughters-in-law, foreshadowing what she will later tell the women of Bethlehem who come out to greet her. The women's incredulous "Can this be Naomi?" (JSB 1581) indicates how altered she has become since: "the Lord has dealt harshly with me? Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me" (JSB 1581). The magnitude of Naomi's lack is best expressed when she symbolically re-names herself, instructing the women to "Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter" (JSB 1581), recognizing a connection between her family's actions and God's response. As Frick says of this part of the narrative,

“the story [of *Ruth*] is as empty”– that is, as lacking –“as it gets” (473).

These lacks, then, form a chain of causation which, as Propp’s second function, initiates the quest, a constellation of complex symbolism. In *Ruth*, the enantiomorphic journey of Ruth and Naomi is repeatedly expressed as a “return” (JSB 1580-81). Naomi’s journey to Bethlehem may easily be symbolically read as *teshuvah*. But Ruth herself is a “friend”, a “companion” (JSB 1580) and not a Bethlehemite; she has never been to Bethlehem. Thus, Ruth’s return carries a deeper meaning. It is clear that Ruth’s decision to cling to Naomi is an act both of definition and redefinition: hereafter, Ruth declares in what must be one of the most famous, most often-cited and most beautifully phrased Biblical phrases, replete as it is with the devices of parallel structure and repetition:

... wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you (JSB 1580-81).

And to this “moving plea,” which “expresses Ruth’s devotion and loyalty to Naomi” (JSB 1580-81), Naomi says nothing.

As the JSB points out in its notes on *Psalms 119*, in Hebrew, “cling” is “a very strong term, often with sexual connotations” (1416) such as when the word appears in *Genesis 2*, describing how a man “leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (JSB 16). Further, the notes point out, the concept of clinging is related to the “later Jewish conception of ‘*deveikut*,’ ‘clinging’ to God” (1416), an idea expressed, much as *Psalms 119* does, in the *Siddurim* : “You who cling to HASHEM your God, you are all alive today” (Scherman 14) and “ It [the Torah] is a tree of life to those who hold it fast, and all who cling to it find happiness” (Stern 147). Literally and symbolically, then, when Ruth clings to her mother-in-law, she attaches herself not merely to Naomi, not merely to the memory of

her dead husband and to the possibility of levirate marriage, but to the refutation of all that Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion – and Naomi – have stood for. Whether one equates her choice of Torah with a choosing of Law or Instruction, Ruth chooses life and happiness. Just as symbolically, Ruth's "passionate declaration of allegiance" (JSB 1581) signifies the refutation of her Moabite people, including her ancestress, the symbolically unnamed daughter of Lot whose lack of faith in God's providence led her, with her sister, to plan and commit incest as their response to a perceived lack – their belief that there were no living men left in the world – and thus produce progeny who are troped as the antithetical enemy of Israel.

Naomi's silence in response to Ruth's speech suggests that she is cognizant of the pointlessness of opposing Ruth's "determination" (JSB 1581). But it may be that Naomi perceives her daughter-in-law as other than an embodiment of "unswerving devotion" (JSB 1580), since, as Zornberg suggests, Ruth, the Moabite daughter-in-law who is neither greeted by nor introduced to the "whole city buzz[ing] with excitement over them" (JSB 1581) and be viewed as the living symbol of Naomi's shame and punishment.

Propp's third function is the encounter of a magical helper. On the most symbolically spiritual level, Ruth is prompted – and protected – by, as Boaz puts it, "the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge" (1582). Boaz's words are not merely a pretty figure of speech, for his use of wing-imagery, symbolically suggestive of spiritual enlightenment, proceeds from the preceding bicolon "May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord ... " (JSB 1582). If having wings is a symbol of spiritual aspiration, to be sheltered by the wings of Adonai, as expressed in the *Hashkiveynu*, is the symbolic representation of the ultimate spiritual expression of peaceful shelter. Having bound herself to Israel's covenantal relationship with God, God, in turn, affords Ruth divine protection.

On the human level, Ruth's magical helper is Boaz, who acts "as a surrogate for God" (Brettler 268) and whose name means "strength/

quickness" (Frick 473). Both quick to make up his mind and firm in his decisions, Boaz is the "redeeming kinsman" (JSB 1582) who quickly takes note of, blesses, advises, and shows favor to Ruth. Naomi shrewdly makes the connection between Boaz' name and temperament, telling Ruth that "the man will not rest [wait], but will settle the matter today" (JSB 1584).

Propp's fourth function is the subjection of the heroine to one or more tests. *Ruth* encompasses three major tests: the testing of Ruth by Naomi, the testing by Ruth of the laws of Israel, and, finally, the mutual testing of Ruth and Boaz. Ruth's test of intent and purpose begins on the "road back to the land of Judah" (JSB 1580), a symbolic location of transition, for journeys typically indicate a search for "truth" and "peace" and "journeys which are an escape from self always fail" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 555-56). Naomi adjures Ruth to "turn back" (JSB 1580) three times, a familiar artistic device and an element of folktale that calls the audience's attention to the importance of what is taking place in the text, a testing of both Naomi's implied and Ruth's expressed purpose. But, as Alter points out in his discussion of Bruce F. Kavin's *Telling It Again and Again*, Biblical repetition "constantly insistson parallels of situations and repetitions of motif that provide moral and psychological commentary" (91).

The timing of Ruth's and Naomi's journey is also deeply symbolic, since it takes place during the time between Pesach and Shavuot, the time specified in *Deuteronomy* 9 as "when the sickle is first put to the standing grain" (JSB 402) and the time that leads to Shavuot, one of the three Pilgrimage Festivals. The harvests of barley and wheat are harvests of primary, but mysterious, foodstuffs. Chevalier and Gheerbrant quote Jean Sevier's observation that "The origin of wheat is utterly unknown, as is that of?barley" (1099). "Enshrined" as two of "the `seven sacred foods of Eretz Israel'" (Kalechofsky and Rasiel 8), so central are these crops to Biblical Israel that *Deuteronomy* 8 describes Israel in literal and symbolic terms as "a land of wheat and barley" (JSB 385). Wheat is used in Israel as ritual offering, one that symbolizes "the gift of life" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1099). Thus, Boaz's

grain gifts to Ruth and Naomi of are symbolic not merely of his generosity or his duty but of his promise of new life. And times of harvest, of course, are not merely agricultural. Harvests also symbolize a time of divine verdict, generally understood as reaping what one has sown, as expressed in *Proverbs* 22.8, but also, and more optimistically, as the promise expressed in *Psalms* 126: "They who sow in tears/shall weep in joy" (JSB 1428).

Ruth's tests of the laws of Israel, specifically as articulated in *Deuteronomy* 16:11, commence when she announces to Naomi her plan to "go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain" (JSB 1581). Fields are symbols of "limitless potentialities" (Cirlot 98); thus, Ruth's venture is encoded with the possibility of success. As the JSB points out in its notes on this statement, "Ruth's remark is puzzling in that she apparently plans to work *among the ears* themselves, that is, in the area that has not yet been harvested" (1581). The notes point out that Ruth's plan diverges from "what was permitted in biblical law", although "some laws differed in different times and places in the biblical period." (JSB 1581). But an examination of symbolic meaning clarifies the apparent legal confusion. In ancient Israel's iconography, according to the Rueben and Edith Hecht Museum at the University of Haifa, wheat and barley symbolized "agricultural plenty and rebirth? stalks of grain?expressed hope and national rebirth." Further, symbolically, the ear of grain is "an emblem of fertility?.It also symbolizes the idea of germination and growth of the development of any feasible potentiality" (Cirlot 89). "As luck would have it" (JSB 1581) is, then, an empty phrase for any reader who is attenuated to the movement of this story---clearly, Ruth's choice of Boaz's fields and its result is not a matter of luck but of divine direction.

As the landowner, a "man of substance" (JSB 1581) in both literal and symbolic terms, Boaz, too, is tested. *Deuteronomy* 18:11 directs that "You shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave?and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst ... " (JSB 402). And from their first encounter, which clearly establishes that Boaz has prior knowledge of who Ruth

is, Boaz fulfills his obligation to her legal standing as a widow and stranger, but one who, paradoxically, is also a relation... Further, in exceeding what is required of him, he demonstrates the *chesed* that distinguishes him from his kinsman Elimelech, thus making a symbolic connection not only to his status as one who upholds God's laws by doing what is legally mandated but to the quality of divine *chesed* itself. For, when Ruth presents herself to him on the threshing-floor, symbolizing not merely the possibility of sexual availability but also her absolute vulnerability, Boaz does not take advantage of his position to use and then dismiss her. Naomi predicts that Boaz "will tell you what you are to do" (1583). Ruth, who has already demonstrated her choice of Israel's God, begins by doing "just as her mother-in-law had instructed her" (JSB 1583), but she reiterates her own choice when she "echoes" Boaz's "own words" (JSB 1583) of divine protection that he has spoken to her, directing him to spread his robe over her and reminding him that he is a "redeeming kinsman" (JSB 1583), effectively relying upon his observance of the Law, which he demonstrates first, by protecting her reputation and finally, by becoming her literal redeemer. When Boaz commends Ruth because her "latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first" (JSB 1583), he acknowledges her ability to choose differently. And he clearly understands the symbolism of her actions--- Boaz commends her not because her choice of him is "clearly flattering" (JSB 1584), but because, on the threshing-floor, the place of separation of grain and chaff, substance and worthlessness, true testing, separation as expressed in the laws of *kadosh*, has taken place. According to Cirlot, "all sheaves, bunches and sprays [of grain] stand for psychic forces which are integrated and directed to a proper purpose" (89). Congruent with her decision that Naomi's God will be her God, Ruth has proven that she understands "proper purpose"--that she has been transformed from a Moabite to a Jew, that she is not simply in search of a man but that she knows and wishes to observe the law. And, in observance of the law, Boaz publicly, and with the proper witnesses, clarifies his claim to Ruth and Elimelech's land as well as his adherence to the law. The sandal, a "sign of liberty amongst the ancients, since slaves walked barefoot" (Cirlot 106) is the medium

of exchange that symbolically seals Ruth's redemption and frees her to marry Boaz and take her publicly and properly acknowledged place in Israel.

The testing of Ruth and Boaz culminates in the fifth of Propp's functions, the reward, which is an organic resolution of the situation in which *Ruth* begins: as Luthi acknowledges, the "formula of *lack* ... followed by *lack liquidated* ... designates a basic phenomenon" since all forms of life "live in the rhythm that is encompassed by the formula of lack and lack liquidated" (130). The reward, the liquidation of lack, or, to put it another way, the move from emptiness to fulfillment" (Reinhartz 1578), is the birth of Obed – "servant" – (Sohn 27), who serves many functions. As the first fruit – the harvest – of the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, he is the restoration of plenty and the elimination of lack for Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. As his communal naming and his genealogy affirm, he also serves a purpose for Israel – he is a crucial link in the chain that leads to King David, the restoration of the monarchy and beyond. In a symbolic sense, a child is "futuraity ... an anticipation of future developments ... a symbol that unites the opposites, a mediator, bringer of healing" (Jung and Kerenyi 83), and, indeed, Obed serves all of these functions, as he, too, is characterized a "redeemer" (JSB 1585). Naomi embraces the redemption symbolized by Obed by holding him "to her bosom" (JSB 1585), a symbolic gesture of acceptance and protection. Ruth already has been publicly blessed and accorded the status of matriarch for her part in building up "the House of Israel" upon "coming into the house" of Boaz at the time of her marriage (JSB 185). Now, with the birth of Obed, Ruth is publicly acclaimed not only for her love of Naomi, but because she "is better to you than seven sons" (JSB 1585), a powerfully symbolic statement of Ruth's true worth.

For the careful reader of *Ruth*, however, the problem of the taboo Moabite wife set out in *Deuteronomy* 23 does not end with the conclusion of the narrative. The prohibition against Moab is not revoked; it is not even directly addressed in the text of *Ruth*. But in *Ruth Rabbah* 4, 8, a happy resolution is provided into perpetuity. Ruth is freed from

the Moabite taboo not merely by the symbolic examples of her modesty, since "her mother-in-law had instructed her well." In order to be the suitable great-grandmother of David, there needs to be a proof that will do away with any questions as to the David's disqualification resulting from the unsuitability of having a Moabite in the family tree. That residual lack is remedied: due to a new law, *Ruth Rabbah* recounts, the Moabite prohibition applies only to men, not to women.

But Ruth's reward, according to *Ruth Rabbah* 2, 2, is greater still:

On the strength of his verse they said that Ruth the Moabite did not die until she saw her descendent Solomon sitting and judging the case of the harlots. That is the meaning of the verse, *And carried a throne to be set for the king's mother, i.e. Bath Sheba, And she sat at his right hand* (1 Kings 11, 19), referring to Ruth the Moabite.

The symbolic long life accorded to Ruth in *Ruth Rabbah* is, like being seated on the right hand, the symbol of God's favor in the Hebrew Bible. The right is the direction of "protection" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 801); it also the direction of the "rational, the conscious, the logical" (Cirlot 131), symbolizing Ruth's wise *torah* --"instruction"-- (JSB 1448) of her descendent as he judges his most famous case, the case that will make his name that of "the archetypal wise man" (JSB 1449). But perhaps the most telling comment on *Ruth* found in *Ruth Rabbah* is the simplest. According to Rabbi Ze'ira, the Moabite question is irrelevant: issues "either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission" are not found in *The Book of Ruth* for good reason. The importance of *Ruth*, he says, is what it symbolizes: its purpose is "To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness" (Zornberg), the quality which is enduringly symbolized by Ruth herself.

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Two Poems

By Richard E. Sherwin

Usha in the Galilee

usha's empty
here a pile of stones
there a winepress cut into stone
a clump of poppies red remembrances

famous rabbis cutouts in tin
whitewashed and summarized
in hebrew black
among the purple thistles
cactuses and dandelions
the dry cowpattied path
winds thru

still the sabbath boundary is marked
in greek on stone between another town
nothing else is left of

but then sanhedrin judges gathered here
on hilltops hadrian allowed unharried
burnt by nothing but the sun
escaped from burntout yavneh

and jerusalem
to scribe and pharisee eternal truth and
daily law the centuries to come

hadrian a curse and crumbling wall
that may have kept out pict
but failed to keep out time
the usha talmudists had crystallized
glittering dark matter

no matter how we turned it
radiant
no matter how we turn
Gd's word

no matter stones piled up dug out
no matter metal cutouts standing in
and up for brilliant minds returned
to Gd and us forever

bonding jacob joseph david jonathan
souls bound up in souls
eternal

Mist On the Moon

mist on the moon. clouds on the sun.
when thou hast donne thou hast not donne.

do not go gentle into that good day.
the seas rise windless without a wave.

fish are gone. gulls on empty.
ah when gd was one and twenty.

round the ghosts of honor glide.

what holy ghost is on our side.

joggers slosh through flooded streets.

to meet the faces of the fleet.

dawn claws up to bleach the moon.

dark dark amid the blaze of noon.

the crows. the crows. the crows. the crows.

and where they stop nobody knows.

