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THE EVOLUTION OF THE HEBREW SHORT-STORY: A SURVEY¹

I

The short-story is one of the oldest and most popular forms of Hebrew literature.

It is not known whether in Biblical times there existed professional story-tellers like the ones known in the Orient from Antiquity to our own days, or akin to the classical *λογόποιοι*, who mingled myths and legends with historical traditions and stories. Although the *Bible* never mentions them, it is not impossible that besides those "that speak in proverbs" ("ha-moshlim"; Numbers 21, 27; etc.) the Ancient Hebrews also knew those who tell tales². Anyway, there can be little doubt that the various traditions, legendary, historical and "literary" were preserved orally and transmitted from generation to generation from time immemorial. When part of them began to be put down in writing all the different elements were already amalgamated and the writers could not separate holy from secular. The more so, since the whole "Holy History" from "In the beginning..." to the very end of the *Old Testament* was regarded as "Gesta Dei per Hebraeos". This is how so many excellent stories were included in the *Book of Books*. Like the *Histories* of Herodotus, the historical books of the *Bible* contain many good and interesting stories. Some of them belong, no doubt, to the oldest specimens of the art of short-story writing preserved.

For example the story of Joseph. Scholars as different in their approach as Engel³ and Gunkel⁴ regard it as a model of a "novelle". As Gunkel

¹ Cf. Y. A. Klausner, *The „Novelle“ in Hebrew Literature*, Tel-Aviv 1947 (in Hebrew), and Prof. A. Diez Macho, *La Novelística Hebraica Medieval*, Barcelona 1952 (based chiefly on the aforementioned work).

² See e. g. H. Gunkel, *Das Märchen im A. T.*, Tübingen 1921, pp. 162-163.

³ E. Engel, *Was bleibt?*, Leipzig 1928, pp. 152-153.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

puts it: "das Vorbild einer Märchennovelle". According to Engel it fulfills all the conditions of narratory art: a hero of some importance as central figure; tension; condensation omitting inessentials and emphasizing the core of the story. Even Paul Heyse's "Falke" is not lacking⁵.

The "international connections", so typical for the history of the Hebrew short-story, start already here. The episode about Joseph and Potiphar's wife⁶ reveals an astonishing similarity to the first part of the ancient Egyptian *Story of Two Brothers*⁷. However, the monotheism of the Jews practically excluded the fantastic elements in which the rest of the Egyptian tale abounds.

Three little books, incorporated in the wonderful anthology of Hebrew literature known as the *Bible*, have as a whole, and not only in part, the character of stories: *Jonah*, *Ruth* and *Esther*.

Jonah has a strong legendary background. *The Book of Ruth* is, as Goethe said, "das lieblichste kleine Ganze ... das uns episch und idyllisch überliefert worden ist"⁸. *The Book of Esther* is the only one that can be regarded as a typical oriental story. The action is concentrated and dramatic. There are only a few heroes. The story told is an unusual but not a fantastic one. Thus *Esther* is akin to the Renaissance short-stories, which also sometimes had as their background the splendid courts of Oriental rulers. The author of the *Scroll of Esther* was a great artist. He succeeded in weaving into his main plot several episodes that are never superfluous. They further the development of the action (the conspiracy against Ahasuerus, the king's insomnia and its results). The author quite often uses the technique of contrasts: the high hopes of Haman — and the elevation of his enemy Mordecai, to which he himself is forced to contribute; instead of the annihilation of the Jews there takes place on the same day the annihilation of their enemies; and so on. Even the style of the book reveals traces of the author's tendency to contrasts: 3,15: "the city of Shushan was perplexed"; 8, 15: "the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad".

The few characteristic trends of *The Book of Esther* enumerated here should suffice to prove that already in Biblical times the art of short-story writing was highly developed among the Jews. This was by no means the first step in its evolution.

⁵ On Heyse's „Falkentheorie“ see: P. Heyse, H. Kurz, *Deutscher Novellenschatz*, B. I., 1871, pp. 17 ff.

⁶ *Genesis* 39.

⁷ English, e. g.: J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts...*, Princeton 1955, 2nd ed., pp. 23—25.

⁸ *Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständnis des West-östlichen Diwans*, Hebräer.

II

Hebrew literature in Biblical times was not limited to the books included in the *Old Testament*. Many other books existed and were lost and some survived. Already several centuries before the canonization of the *Bible* the Jews translated into their vernacular Aramaic a story that gained unusual popularity.

More than fifty years ago archaeologists discovered the archive of a Jewish military colony on the island of Elephantine in Upper Egypt. Among the fifth century B. C. papyri found here was i. a. the oldest known version of *The Book of 'Ahiqar* — in Aramaic. The story possibly originated in Assyria and the Aramaic version may have been composed in the sixth century B. C. Many later versions exist: Syriac, Arabic (included also in *The Thousand and One Nights*), Ethiopian, Greek, Armenian, Old Turkish and Slavonic. It was also known to some classical Greek authors.

The Book of 'Ahiqar was a favourite because it combined the two forms that were most popular in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages: an amazing story and moral sayings.

'Ahiqar was a high official of the Assyrian King Sennacherib. He adopted his relative Nadan and instructed him by means of wise proverbs. Nadan, however, betrayed his benefactor and 'Ahiqar with difficulty escaped the death sentence. On his return to favour 'Ahiqar imprisoned Nadan and subjected him to another flood of wise sayings. Nadan died in prison.

The story of 'Ahiqar was not without influence on the literature of the Jews. 'Ahiqar is mentioned several times in the apocryphal *Book of Tobit*, where he is described as a Jew and Tobit's relative.

The majority of the apocryphal books of the *Old Testament* was most probably written in Hebrew. However, only fragments of a few of the original texts have been found so far; all but one among the famous *Dead Sea Scrolls*.

Many of the Apocrypha contain good stories and a few are complete stories in themselves. Such is the above-mentioned *Book of Tobit*⁹. Probably based to a certain degree on the popular legend about "the Grateful Dead" it is full of miracles. Its influence can be traced in medieval Hebrew literature.

The *Book of Tobit* served also as a source of many modern literary works. However, in this it was surpassed by the *Book of Judith*. Perhaps

⁹ Fragments in Hebrew and Aramaic were discovered recently in one of the caves near the Dead Sea. See e. g. J. M. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Harmondsworth, 1956, p. 119.

inspired by the *Song of Deborah*¹⁰ this book has a simple but well-constructed dramatic plot and Judith is an outstanding character.

A real masterpiece is the *Book of Susanna* (in the Vulgate — part of the *Book of Daniel*). The simplicity of this veritable "short story" (to use a modern definition) is probably the key to its particular charm. In a mere forty-eight verses¹¹ its author succeeded in condensing a whole drama. The innocent heroine is brought to the brink of execution. Then a new character (Daniel) is introduced and changes the situation completely.

The "first criminal story" in world literature — as the story of *Susanna* has been called — is no doubt one of the most remarkable of Hebrew short-stories¹². It inspired many writers and artists (i. a. Rubens and Rembrandt).

III

From the second to the end of the fifth century A. D. the literary production of the Jews, both in and outside Palestine, was — as far as we know — limited almost exclusively to so-called Talmudic literature. The *Talmud* and all the other works of this long period are far from homogeneous. True, this literature was originally intended to be nothing more than a kind of commentary (both legal and homiletic) to the *Bible*. As it is, the *Talmud* in particular may perhaps be best described as a kind of "stenographic" account of proceedings dealing with religious law, problems of moral conduct etc. Everything that was said by anybody present, even stories, legends, anecdotes, was set down in this "account".

The "Midrashim" (sing.: "Midrash") were running commentaries to certain books of the *Bible*. Some of the "Midrashim" dealt predominantly with religious law ("Halakhah"), others were chiefly homiletic. The latter, while interpreting the Biblical text, dealt with any subject not included in the concept "halakhah": history and legends, prayers and anecdotes, science and stories, and so on. All this was dubbed shortly; "'agadah" (literally: "a thing said"; a narrative).

Thus during many generations the "'agadah" was practically the only substitute also for belles-lettres. The "'agadah" penetrated everywhere: it was a permanent companion to the "halakhah", it added a flavour of poetry to the otherwise hairsplitting and dry-as-dust scholastic discussions. It embellished commentaries and sermons, books on ethics,

¹⁰ *Judges* 5.

¹¹ In the *Septuagint*; *Theodotion* has 64.

¹² No traces of a Hebrew version have so far been discovered, nevertheless it was probably written in this language originally.

philosophy and even science far beyond the Talmudic period, through the Middle Ages and right up to the end of the eighteenth century. However, the "agadah" paid a price for this ubiquity. It had to adjust itself to the material into which it was interpollated: to shrink, to forgo any tendency towards epic effluence and often to tell a whole story in a few lines.

Some of these stories are introduced as examples to prove a certain statement or "halakhah"; others serve as homiletic illustrations to Biblical texts; and a few are only loosely connected with the relevant "halakhah" or verse of the Bible. Their sources were manifold and many are the parallels to the "agadic" stories in world literature. Sometimes we are told stories about clever tricks or even deceits. These stories closely resemble some of those told later by medieval and renaissance story-tellers who more than once use the same motifs. A few examples to illustrate the motifs in the "agadah" follow.

A man decides to divorce his childless wife, but allows her to take with her whatever she chooses. The wife takes to her parents' house — her sleeping husband (*Shir-ha-Shirim Rabah*, ch. 1) ¹³.

This story is essentially identical with the German *Sage von der Weinsberger Weibertreu* ¹⁴. A father leaves his son only one item of his property according to the son's choice. All the rest is to go to a slave. The son chooses the slave — and all his father's inheritance becomes his, because all the property of the slave according to law belongs to his master ¹⁵.

The following is a translation of a story from Babylonian *Talmud* ¹⁶. It illustrates the extreme condensation of the "agadic" stories and their frequent connection with foreign literatures.

„A man with a monetary claim upon his neighbour once came before Raba, demanding of the debtor: »Come and pay me«. »I have repaid you« pleaded he. »If so« said Raba to him — »go and swear to him that you have repaid«. Thereupon he went and brought a [hollow] cane, placed the money therein, and came before the Court, walking and leaning upon it. [Before swearing] he said to the plaintiff: »Hold the cane in your hand«. He then took a scroll of the Law and swore that he had repaid him all that he [the creditor] held in his hand [i. e. all he claimed of him]. The creditor thereupon broke the cane in his rage and the money poured

¹³ *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. IX; [*Esther and*] *Song of Songs*, transl. by M. Simon, London 1939, pp. 48—49.

¹⁴ Cf. H. Hoffmann, *Die Sage...*, „Königsberger Diss.“, 1925; Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk-Literature*, rev. ed., vol. IV, Copenhagen 1957, p. 124: nos. J 1545. 4 and J 1545. 4. 1.

¹⁵ „Yalqut Shim'oni“ to *Ecclesiastes*, II.

¹⁶ *Nedarim*, 25a. *The Babylonian Talmud*, *Nashim*. V. *Nedarim*, transl. by H. Freedman, London 1936, p. 71.

out on the ground; it was thus seen that he had [literally] sworn to the truth".

This is no doubt an excellent little story condensed to the size of an anecdote. It also appears in other Talmudic sources¹⁷ and originated in the East, possibly in Palestine¹⁸. However, the story about the hollow cane was most popular from Antiquity to Modern Times. Many versions are known from various sources. Outside the Talmudic sources it appears for the first time in Greek literature: among the fragments of the mythographer Conon (first century B. C. — first century A. D.), preserved in Photius' *Bibliotheca*¹⁹. Together with many other Biblical and Talmudic stories the anecdote about the hollow cane was most probably retold to the Arabs by their Jewish neighbours²⁰. These in their turn handed it down to the Ethiopians²¹.

Among the few crumbs of the magnificent classical heritage picked up by the Christian Middle Ages was also the story first told by Conon — it was incorporated into the life of St. Nicholas in the famous *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine (thirteenth century). This was the source for many subsequent authors, notably Cervantes²². Finally our story made its way into popular literature²³.

Similar was the fate of several other Talmudic stories, which proves how strong were the ties between the Hebrew short-story and the foreign one. These ties, traceable already in Biblical times, became particularly strong in the Middle Ages.

IV

According to the thirteenth century French poet Jean Bodel there were only *trois matières* worthy of an educated man: „De France et de Bretagne et de Rome la Grant". About a hundred years earlier a famous Hebrew scholar and poet Abraham Ibn Ezra (1092—1167) pointed out in one of his poems the following main elements of medieval culture: the love poetry of the Arabs, the chivalresque poems of the western knights, Greek science, the parables and tales of the Indians and the

¹⁷ *Va-yiqra Rabah* VI etc.

¹⁸ Cf. *Mishnah, Kelim*, XVII, 16. (*The Mishnah*, transl. by H. Danby, Oxford 1933, p. 631).

¹⁹ Ex recens. J. Bekkeri, t. I, Berolini 1824, p. 138.

²⁰ G. Weil, *Biblische Legenden der Musulmänner*, Frankfurt a. M. 1845, pp. 214—215.

²¹ *The Life & Exploits of Alexander the Great. Being a series of Ethiopic Texts*, ed. by E. A. Wallis Budge, vol. II, London 1896, p. 289.

²² Sancho Panza's judgment in *Don Quixote*, II, p. 45.

²³ J. C. Dunlop, *History of Prose Fiction*, A New Edition by H. Wilson, vol. I, London 1888, pp. 11—12.

religious literature of the Jews. No doubt Ibn Ezra omitted more than one important element of his cultural environment (e.g. the philosophy of both East and West). His was nevertheless a far broader view than the French poet's of what it befitted a cultured man to know. For Ibn Ezra himself, like the nation to which he belonged, wandered from country to country, through Spain and France, England and Provence, Italy and the East. Everywhere he went he studied and taught.

The Middle Ages, so often regarded as a period of stagnation in the cultural development of Christian Europe, were far from being the „Dark Ages” of Hebrew literature. Medieval Hebrew literature was rich, brilliant and many-sided. It was surpassed by western literature perhaps only since Dante. The appetite of the Hebrew reader was astonishingly catholic. It is sufficient to say that innumerable Hebrew translators covered every field of human knowledge: even books on falconry, gastronomy and hyppiatics found their Hebrew translators and obviously readers²⁴.

Medieval Hebrew prose fiction was rich and varied too: original, based on foreign examples or translated. Unfortunately, comparatively little of this kind of literature has survived. In the haversacks of the exiles, driven from one country after another, wandering for ever, there was always room for religious, devotional, moral or even serious scholarly works but hardly for belles-lettres.

As already mentioned the stories included in "’agadic" literature continued to be extremely popular during the Middle Ages and after²⁵. However, many new stories appeared during the Middle Ages, stories in which the tragic fate and the sufferings of the Jews are reflected. Some of them resemble the Christian *Lives of the Saints* but it should be remembered that the routes of Jewish hagiography can be traced already in the apocryphical *Books of Maccabees* (II, ch. 7) and in the *Talmud* (e. g. *Gittin*, 57 b — *Maccabees* II, 7).

The old "’agadic" book *Midrash of the Martyrs*²⁶ is a collection of martyrological stories. It is quite possible that the *Hebrew Martyrology* served as an example for the first Christian one by Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260—ca. 340). Both were written in Palestine. The Hebrew one deals with the persecutions of Hadrian (after 135 A. D.).

²⁴ Cf. the monumental work of M. Steinschneider, *Die hebräischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters* ..., Berlin 1893 (repr.: Graz 1956).

²⁵ Thus e. g. we find the story about the hollow cane in a moral book of Bahya ben Asher of Saragossa (thirteenth century): *Kad Ha-Qemah*, Lemberg 1858, ch. 7, p. 87a.

²⁶ *Midrash Aseret Harugey Malkhut* called also: *Midrash Eleh Ezkerah*. See: A. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, II, Jerusalem 1938, pp. 64—72.

Two of the medieval Jewish stories are perhaps typical. *The Story of Rabbi Amnon* is attributed to rabbi Efrayim of Bonn (thirteenth century)²⁷. It tells of a Jewish rabbi who was on friendly terms with the bishop of Mainz. The bishop tried to convert the rabbi. Once, tired of his Christian friend's entreaties, rabbi Amnon promised to give him an answer in three days' time. Immediately after leaving the bishop rabbi Amnon realized that even this promise was a sin. When he did not come to the bishop in time he was brought there by force. The bishop asked the rabbi what punishment he deserved. Rabbi Amnon answered: the tongue that sinned should be cut out. The bishop, however, ordered the rabbi's disobedient hands and legs to be cut off.

The story is permeated with the spirit of religious fanaticism that was the scourge of the Crusader era. This fanaticism is revealed not only in the bishop's zeal and cruelty but also in the rabbi's extreme religiosity.

The same spirit dominates the *Story about the Jewish Pope Elhanan*²⁸. 'Elhanan, a Jewish boy, was stolen by a Christian servant and baptized. He was brought up as a priest and in due time elected pope. One day 'Elhanan discovered the secret of his origin. He summoned his father who persuaded him that Judaism was the true religion. 'Elhanan preached in this spirit and committed suicide by jumping from the top of a tower. According to another version he fled and secretly reverted to Judaism²⁹.

A collection of tales linked by a common idea was gathered and written down in Arabic by a famous talmudic scholar from North Africa, rabbi Nisim ben Ya'aqob of Kairouan (eleventh century). Most of the stories included in his *Book of Stories* (or *The Pleasant Book of Comfort*) are borrowed from Talmudic literature. Rabbi Nisim added many small details, however, that turn the extremely concise 'agadahs, into genuine short-stories. Part of the stories aim to comfort Rabbi Nisim's son-in-law, who lost his son; thence the title. The connecting idea of the book is the justification of God (theodicy) in all cases and under all conditions. It was proved that in this Nisim ben Ya'aqob was influenced by one of the schools of Moslem philosophy ("al-Mu'tazila"). His book in spite of its purely Jewish sources, belongs to the well-known branch of Arab literature called "Comfort after suffering"³⁰.

²⁷ First recorded in 'Or Zarua by Rabbi Yitzhaq ben Mosheh of Vienna, part II, par. 276.

²⁸ Reprinted by A. Jellinek, *op. cit.*, VI, pp. 137—139.

²⁹ The historical essence of this history probably springs from the Jewish origin of Pope Anacletus II (1130—1138), the grandson of a Jewish convert, called by his enemies „Judaeo-Pontifex“.

³⁰ Cf. A. Wiener, *Die Farağ b'd aš-Šidda-Literatur*, „Der Islam“, IV (1913), pp. 270—298, 387—420.

V

The influence of Arabic literature on the literature of the Jews living in Arab countries was of great importance. It was most significant in Spain. And here, in the twelfth century the Jews adapted the Arabic literary form "maqama". The ultimate form of the "maqama" was fixed by al-Hamadhani (d. 1007) and particularly by al-Hariri (1054—1122).

The "maqama" (pl. "maqamat") is written in rhymed prose, consisting of quotations (mainly from the Koran). The verses are often deliberately changed and corrupted, quoted only partly and linked with others, quite inappropriate, so as to create unexpected, arresting and often comical effects.

There are in the „maqama" usually two main persons: the hero and the narrator. The hero is "a witty, unscrupulous vagabond journeying from place to place" and earning his living by his brilliant rhetoric and his wits. The narrator continually meets the hero, each time discovering him in a different disguise. Each adventure is called "maqama" and is a complete story in itself ³¹.

Hebrew literature used the same framework and very often borrowed the literary motifs of the Arabs. It was only natural that the Hebrew "mahberet" (pl.: "mahbarot"), as it was called, was composed of Biblical (and not Koranic) quotations. The "mahbarot" like the "maqamat", include a great number of excellent short-stories ³².

The oldest surviving Hebrew "maqama" is probably the one written in the first half of the twelfth century by Shelomoh Ibn Saqbel and beginning: "Saith Asher the Son of Yehudah". This is a short romantic-ironic episode. Asher invited by an unknown lady, entered a harem and discovered his old friend, the vagabond hero of the "mahberet", disguised as a woman.

The Book of Delights was written by the learned physician Yosef Ibn Zabarah of Barcelona (ca. 1140—ca. 1200). Its frame story is very simple. The author was tempted by a stranger called Eynan to leave his native town. Together they went to Eynan's country. Disappointed in his companion and the place they came to, Yosef returned to Barcelona. Into this frame Ibn Zabarah introduced a collection of tales, sayings, scholarly discussions etc. Thus a typical medieval *silva rerum* was created. Short-stories added to the attractions of the delightful *Book of Delights* whose author's slogan certainly was *delectare et prodesse*.

³¹ Cf. e. g. R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge 1941, p. 328 ff.

³² Cf. J. Schirmann, *Die hebräische Übersetzung der Maqamen des Hariri*, Frankfurt a. M. 1930.

In a language simple but full of wit and charm, Ibn Zabarah tells fifteen tales. Some of them are fables, and some real short-stories. They came from many sources — Jewish and Classical, Arabic and Indian and found their way into many of the most famous European collections: *El Conde Lucanor* by Juan Manuel (1282—1348), *Gesta Romanorum*, *Cento Novelle Antiche* and Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. Thus e. g. 'Ibn Zabarah retold the famous story known as *The Widow of Ephesus*.

A woman was lamenting on the grave of her husband. Nearby a soldier stood watch over the body of a hanged man. He went over to the weeping woman and in no time succeeded in consoling her. However, in the meantime someone had stolen the body he had been set to watch. The widow dug out her husband and hung his body instead of the stolen one.

This story is known in European literature since the famous *Satiricon* of Petronius, Nero's *elegantiae arbiter* and victim. The motif was known all over the world, far and wide, from China to Britain³³.

'Ibn Zabarah's immediate source was probably — of all places — a passage in the Talmud commentary, quoted in the name of a North African scholar rabbi Hananel of Kairouan (eleventh century)³⁴. In the thirteenth century Berekhyah ben Natronay included it in his collection of *Fox Fables*.

Although 'Ibn Zabarah adapted the anti-feminine story of Petronius, he could not be regarded as a misogynist. His contemporary Yehudah Ibn Shabtay was called so. 'Ibn Shabtay's "mahberet" *The Gift of Yehudah the Woman-Hater* is one of the best humorous works in Hebrew.

A wise old man, Tahkmoni, warned his son Zerah not to marry, describing all the miseries of married life. When his father died Zerah stuck to his admonitions and even became a missionary of anti-feminism. „And many of the people of the land became converted, for the fear of Zerah fell upon them”³⁵. Naturally the women were fully aware of the formidable danger and were not slow in taking action against Zerah. The prophet of mysogynism fell an easy prey to a beautiful girl sent to tempt him. Zerah agreed to marry her. The marriage ceremony and the text of the marriage contract ("ketubah") are excellent parodies. The morning after the wedding Zerah discovered that the beauty with whom he had fallen in love was superseded by an ugly, garrulous and quarrelsome woman. His bride immediately orders him about saying that he must work and not sleep and that he must provide her with... and here follows a very long list of all her needs. Poor Zerah opened his mouth to complain but his

³³ See: F. Griesebach, *Die Wanderungen der Novelle von der treulosen Witwe durch die Weltliteratur*, Berlin 1886.

³⁴ "Tosafot" to the Babylonian Talmud, *Quidushin*, p. 80 b.

³⁵ Cf. *Esther* VIII, 17.

wife cut him short: „Do not tell your tales and do not raise your voice! I do not want reason and morals but bread and meat; your tales and poems are naught to me — no one will give wine for your songs”. Zerah's three friends hearing of his misfortune — just like Job's friends — came to mourn with him and comfort him. Here they are joined by the author himself, who is married too and has reason to complain of the ill fate "that delivered us as slaves into the hands of women". The friends advise Zerah to divorce his wife. However, before the judge, all the women object. And here again the author suddenly puts in an appearance and like a real *deus ex machina* finds an astonishingly modern and ironical solution. He announces before the judge that the whole story is not true: there never was a Tahkmoni and Zerah never married the monstrous woman. All the persons appearing before the judge are solely the author's invention.

'Ibn Shabtay, as a matter of fact, was not at all a woman-hater and he even declared that he loved his own wife. His only aim was to entertain and in this he undoubtedly succeeded. Nevertheless 'Ibn Shabtay, as already mentioned, was himself nicknamed "the Woman Hater" and his "mahberet" provoked long polemics that continued in Spain, Provence and Italy for hundreds of years.

None of the above-mentioned authors followed the example of the classical Arabic "maqama", as established by al-Hariri. This was done by the Hebrew translator of al-Hariri's *chef-d'oeuvre*, Yehudah 'al-Harizi (died before 1235). 'Al-Harizi was himself a wandering *troubadour* and earned his bread translating from Arabic and writing Hebrew poems. His travels in the Orient provided him with the vast material for his "Tahkemoni", consisting of an introduction and fifty "mahbarot". Each one is an episode in itself and in each the author brings together his "hero", Heber ha-Qini, and his "narrator" Heyman ha-'Ezrahi. Heber is a typical picaro, but endowed with a poetic gift and complete mastery of language. These gifts and his cunning enable him to appear in many disguises and lay claim to proficiency in any vocation that happens to suit his designs. Several of the episodes are real stories, some drawn from Arabic sources and some from sources as yet unidentified.

Heyman fell in love with a beautiful woman. However her face, as is the rule in Moslem countries, was veiled. Yielding to Heyman's entreaties she ultimately uncovers her face — the smiling, rascally face of Heber, this time disguised in woman's attire (ch. 20). This story bears a resemblance to the little "maqama" of 'Ibn Saqbel.

Heyman met Heber and heard the following story from him. Heber was hungry and penniless. Suddenly he saw a peasant riding a donkey. He approached him, embraced him and asked him about his father, who — as

he said — was his friend. When the peasant told him that his father was dead, Heber simulated deep sorrow. Then he invited his "late friend's" son to a dainty meal. However, as may be surmised, Heber found a way to sneak out before the bill was brought (ch. 21).

The realism of this little story reminds one of the *novela picaresca*, where the picaro very often plays practical jokes at the expense of a village simpleton. Similar themes are frequent also in the books of Italian story-tellers from Boccaccio onwards. 'Al-Harizi's source in this case was al-Hamadhani.

'Al-Harizi's *Tahkemoni* is not a book of stories. As in the case of so many medieval writings its contents are varied and include only a few real stories.

The rhymed prose and mosaic of verses, typical for the "maqama" were used in Hebrew literature also in other literary forms, e. g. fables.

Two Hebrew fabulists of the thirteenth century chose to write their books in this way.

Berekhyah ben Natronay ha-Naqdan (i. e. "The Punctator") lived in France and perhaps also in England. He was a learned man, versed in Latin and philosophy. His *Fox Fables* are often adaptations of fables derived from other, non-Hebrew, collections (*Romulus*, *Marie de France*, etc.). Some of them are not strictly fables at all but stories. Thus, as already mentioned above, Berekhyah included in his *Fox Fables* the story of *The Widow of Ephesus*.

Another story Berekhyah related in his fables is about a man who was bled by a doctor and ordered to keep the blood for analysis. His daughter spilt the blood and fearing her father's wrath filled the vessel with her own. Analysing the blood the doctor called out in amazement: It is an unheard-of thing, Sir! — You are pregnant. In the end the patient realized that his disobedient daughter went out to often with young men.

Longer and more numerous are the stories in a collection by Berakhyah's contemporary, the Spanish fabulist Yishaq ben Shelomoh 'Ibn Sahulah of Guadalajara. *The Ancient Fable*³⁶ (1281) is divided into five parts. In each of them the "author" tries to prove the value, and his "opponent" the uselessness, of a certain virtue by illustrative tales. Particularly interesting are the tales of the "opponent". The following are examples.

A learned man suffered so much that he went mad. He became a court jester and had an easy and comfortable life. Unfortunately, his reason returned and he ceased to amuse the King and the Court. When he dared to criticise the courtiers he was flogged and thrown out. Thus he came to

³⁶ Or: *The Fable of the Man from the East* (Meshal Ha-Qadmoni).

understand that "a little folly is better than wisdom ..." (*Ecclesiastes* 10, 1: the *Authorised Version* translates differently).

In another story the "opponent" shows that piousness may be harmful:

A contrite sinner began to spend his days and nights in penitence. This gave his young wife her chance and he did not even notice that she made him a cuckold. Ultimately she ran away with her lover and with all her husband's belongings.

* *
*

The "maqama" was an Arabic literary form. The Hebrew "mahbarot" however, were often written in Christian countries and sometimes influenced by the Romance literatures, in Christian Spain, in Provence and later — in Italy. The chief representative of the "maqama" in Italy was Immanuel ben Shelomoh ha-Romi (died ca. 1328) or Manoello Giudeo as he signed his Italian poems.

Immanuel the Roman was a contemporary of Dante, whom he imitated and whose death he mourned in a sonnet. In his book *Mahbrot Imanuel* (i. e. *Immanuel's Maqamat*) there are only a few stories — most of them in rhymed prose, and some in verse.

The stories of the Italian Jewish rabbi and famous commentator of the Bible were very much in the spirit of his compatriot and younger contemporary Boccaccio.

Perhaps one of the best is the following verse anecdote: The poet meets a pretty girl. Without wasting much time he says: "Have pity on me and let me enjoy the fruit of your love, my dove". The girl does not say no. However, she is willing to give the poet only half of her body — the belt will be the demarcation line. The lover is in a dilemma. Finally he decides to choose the upper part. This gentlemanly behaviour is not wasted on the girl and she places the belt under her feet (ch. 4).

VI

Among the vast number of Hebrew medieval translations, chiefly from the Arabic, there were also several collections of stories. The work of the Hebrew translators was one of the most important links in the long chain of translations that transmitted the treasures of science and fiction of the Greeks and Indians via Persian, Syrian, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin renderings, to the West. Very often not only the translation from Arabic into Hebrew but also from Arabic or Hebrew into Latin was made by a Jew or a Jewish convert from Spain, Provence or Italy.

Thus it would not be an exaggeration to say that the western European story, as it emerged mainly towards the end of the Middle Ages, owes a great deal to Jewish translators.

The source of very many fables, anecdotes and stories most popular in Europe since the Middle Ages, can be traced to three immensely popular Indian collections known in Europe as *Kalilah and Dimnah* of *Fables of Bidpay*³⁷, *Historia Septem Sapientum* or *Sindbad* and *Barlaam and Josaphat*. At least two of them were bestowed on the western world by translators of Jewish provenance³⁸.

Not only practically every European collection of stories but even works of quite a different character (fables, sermons, books of ethics, etc.) contain stories drawn from these three Indian books. Their literary techniques (the frame and the „box“ technique, etc.) became a permanent requisite of European narrators in the Middle Ages, and after.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the first story-book of the European Middle Ages, a book that drew upon eastern sources and exercised a lasting influence on western writers, was the work of a Jew³⁹. The author of *Disciplina Clericalis* is well-known as Petrus Alfonsi (twelfth century). What is less known is that before baptism he was called rabbi Mosheh ha-Sefaradi.

In spite of the chasm between the life of a medieval Jew and of his Christian neighbour, particularly a Christian knight, there was some interest among the Jews of western Europe in chivalresque literature. Books like *The Story of Magelona*, some of the Round Table cycle and part of *Amadis de Gaula* were rendered into Hebrew. Their influence was very limited.

VII

The decline and fall of Moslem culture at the end of the Middle Ages, the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula (1492 and 1497), the Wars of Religion, the Counter-Reformation, persecutions and intolerance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contributed to the decline of the secular literature of the Jews.

The Jews lived in the long period of stagnation that followed, in the enchanted world of a self-imposed cultural ghetto with walls even more impenetrable than those of the real one. This was true especially of Eastern Europe, where the Jews were confined to small towns and villages with

³⁷ No less than 200 versions in more than 50 languages.

³⁸ See e. g. for *Pancatantra* (the Indian source of *Kalilah and Dimnah*): A. B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Oxford 1920 (repr. 1953), pp. 357–359. (Not only the Hebrew translator, Rabbi Joel, was a Jew; the translator into Latin, John of Capua, was a converted Jew). For *Sindbad* see e. g. Hilka, *Historia Septem Sapientum*, I, Heidelberg 1912. *Barlaam and Josaphat* is not a collection of stories, but many stories are included in this „novel“. See e. g.: J. Chotzner, *Hebrew Humour and other Essays*, London 1905, pp. 117–126.

³⁹ Cf. *Die „Disciplina Clericalis“ des Petrus Alfonsi (das älteste Novellenbuch des Mittelalters)...* hrg. von A. Hilka und W. Söderjhelm, Heidelberg 1911.

a surrounding population of totally illiterate peasants. At the same time the contempt in which the nobles and officials held the Jews obviated any hope of cultural exchange.

On the whole the spiritual life of the Jews was limited to religion and mysticism, while such secular literature as was written, largely maintained the medieval traditions. This was the situation i. a. as regards the short-story, in spite of the flourishing of the contemporary Italian *novella*. It is amazing that even the Italian Jews, who so often imitated Dante and Petrarch, did not in fact produce a single follower of Boccaccio.

The collecting of Talmudic legends continued. New sufferings gave rise to new legends which did not differ in essentials from medieval ones. All these were often found together in one compilation. They continued to be interpollated in historical, ethical, "halakhic" and homiletic works. The Arabic form of "maqama" survived too.

The Rod of Yehudah was written by a Spanish Jew, Shelomoh 'Ibn Verga (sixteenth century). He fled to Italy where he wrote his book. *The Rod of Yehudah* is an important source for Jewish history although its author was not strictly speaking an historian. He intended to write a number of stories, discussions and narratives connected with persecutions of the Jews and aimed to urge them to repent. 'Ibn Verga was well versed in Latin, Spanish and Italian literature and the spirit of the Renaissance is not entirely alien to him.

Some of the stories told by him are common property of the European story-tellers. The best example is the story of a father who gave his sons precious stones (or rings), only one of which was genuine. Nobody but the father knows which is the one. God is the father and the monotheistic religions are the precious stones (or rings).

The story was known in the thirteenth century in a French version *Dit dou vrai aniel*. A Latin version exists in *Gesta Romanorum*; two Italian versions in *Cento Novelle Antiche* and in Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. It is now chiefly known through Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*. Lessing's source was the *Decamerone*. This parable is perhaps the best expression of religious tolerance in the Middle Ages. Its hero is a Jew, the representative of the most persecuted faith.

Out of the few "mahbarot" of the period the best stories were assembled in the book of "maqamat" of the sixteenth century Yemenite Jew Yihyah 'Al-Dhahari *The Book of Instruction (Sefer Ha-Musar)*. 'Al-Dhahari's book is constructed on the pattern of the classical "maqamat". In addition to 'Al-Harizi's *Tahkemoni* he knew the works of the Arab masters: al-Hamadhani, al-Harizi and others. From an Arab source he borrowed the story about a statue (or statues) that warned Rome of every imminent danger.

Original is perhaps the story about the contest of three thieves: a Christian, a Moslem and a Jew. The first asked a merchant in the bazaar to extract his aching tooth. The mob assembled to witness the "performance". The moment the merchant touched the thief's tooth it was healed. In the meantime the thief's accomplice emptied the healer's store.

The second thief went to a jeweller's shop and expressed his amazement that the owner, having such treasures, is not afraid of robbers that steal even in daylight. He "showed" the jeweller how such daring robberies are committed, by taking his treasure box, moving out of the shop with it and locking the door behind him. The jeweller never saw either the visitor or the box again.

The third thief inquired about the past and present of a very rich merchant. He found his way into the merchant's treasury but did not take anything. He only made a detailed list of the contents of a box full of jewels, describing himself as the owner and leaving a copy in the box. A second copy he took with him.

In the morning the thief appeared before the merchant disguised as one coming from a distant country and demanded the return of a box of precious stones which he claimed he entrusted to his "friend" the merchant before going abroad. The merchant denied ever knowing the thief. When in court, the thief revealed a very good knowledge of the merchant's life and showed the list of jewels in the box he "left" with the merchant. The box was brought to the court and its contents were exactly as shown in the thief's list. Moreover, a copy of the same list with the thief's name as the owner was found in it. Thus the judge "returned" the thief the box that was never his.

VIII ⁴⁰

The Jewish short-story during the Middle Ages and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was nearly always very brief and concise. Only the plot was important in it. At times some significance was attached to elaborate style and to moral teaching. The plot was usually anecdotal and had a point. There was no room for descriptions of the heroes or of their environment and no attempt at any psychological explanation of their deeds or words. The motif of the story was often common to Hebrew and other literatures. All these trends were typical not only for the Hebrew short-story but also for the short-story in other contemporary literatures.

The Hebrew "pseudo-classical" period (1784—1820) did not, as a matter of fact, change very much. The eighteenth century was hardly a "golden

⁴⁰ In connection with chapters VIII—X see: S. Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, New York 1950; R. Wallenrod, *The Literature of Modern Israel*, New York and London 1956; M. Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, New York, 2nd ed., Vol. III 1945 and Vol IV 1947; and others.

age" for the European short-story. Hebrew literature, whose main centres shifted to Germany and later eastwards to Austria (chiefly Galicia), Poland, Lithuania and Russia, at this time renewed its contacts with European literature. Thus there appeared some fables, satires and moralizing stories of the kind known from the "moral" journals then in vogue. These were mostly translations from the German.

The shortlived Hebrew romanticism (1820—1860) introduced a complicated plot and some insight in the psychology of the "dramatis personae". Typical is one of the first modern Hebrew short-stories *The House of Hanan* by the famous novel-writer Abraham Mapu (1808—1868). It is a mixture of the idyllic and the adventurous. The plot and the psychology are very naive and it has outspoken didactic tendencies (it was published in a school textbook). All this is reminiscent of the novels of Eugène Sue.

More important are the stories written during the "realistic" period (ca. 1860—1881). Here we get a glimpse of the real life of the Jews in Eastern Europe, dull, sad and petty, with its many daily sorrows and very few joys. The realistic writers dealt with the actual problems of their fellow Jews, without indulging in romantic adventures or describing imaginary Arcadias. Very few of them choose the short-story as their principal means of expression.

Y. L. Gordon (1830—1892) was first and foremost the greatest poet of the period and his stories, although not bad, fell far behind his poetry. P. Smolenskin (ca. 1840—1885) was a novelist and a journalist; a forerunner of Zionism. His short-stories form a small part only of his vast literary legacy. Even R. A. Braudes (1851—1902), whose short-stories are, in our opinion, his most important contribution, is mainly known for his novels. Braudes published only two novels, one of which was never finished, while he left about twenty short-stories. Their artistic value no doubt overshadows that of his novels. Braudes was the first to abandon the "didacticism" of his predecessors and devote his attention (in some of his stories at any rate) to the people and facts he described. Consequently he has written stories where the plot is far less significant than the inner life of the heroes (*Instead of a Daughter* and *The Woman and her Children* — "two psychological pictures"). Remarkable is Braudes' story *A Pious Man*, full of warm human feeling and deep psychological insight and understanding for his poor, ignorant and fanatical hero. This is by far the best short-story of the whole century between the beginning of the Enlightenment (1784) and the beginning of the national revival (1881).

Braudes' short-stories were only partly collected and never republished and are mostly forgotten. Still, he was not surpassed even by the first Hebrew writer to write short-stories almost exclusively, M. D. Brandstädter (1844—1928).

IX

The national revival of the Jews found its main expression in the Zionist movement, whose influence increased after the Russian pogroms of 1881—1882. These pogroms sealed off any hope of emancipation and assimilation cherished by part of the Jewish intelligentsia in countries dominated by the Tzars.

Zionism urged the revival of the ancient tongue of the prophets not only as a literary medium (as such it had always been alive) but also as the language of school and of daily life. This extended the number of readers of Hebrew and widened their circle. Hebrew began to be read, in addition to scholars and graduates of religious schools, by people who were just interested in belles-lettres. The result soon became apparent: an unusually rich output of poetry and prose.

The story was one of the favorite literary forms in Europe from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, reaching a high degree of artistry. The Hebrew writers followed suit.

Among the numerous Hebrew story-writers of this period several produced works of lasting value. David Frishman (1862—1922) was well versed in contemporary foreign literature (he was a very successful translator) and was influenced by it. However, his short-stories are far from being imitations. Particularly excellent is his collection of short-stories *In the Desert*. Here Frishman describes episodes from the life of the Sons of Israel during their wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. Frishman succeeded in producing masterpieces by bringing to life scenes merely hinted at in the laconic verses of the Bible.

"Mendele Mokher-Sefarim" (i. e. Sh. Y. Abramowitz; ca. 1836—1917), too, owed much to foreign influences; the great Russian satirist Saltykov-Shchedrin was his chief master. At the same time Mendele is one of the most typical Jewish writers, concerned in his short-stories (just as in his novels) with the small people and petty events of Jewish life in the "pale of settlement" ("черта оседлости").

The new writers, after 1880—1881, often underlined the values of Judaism and idealized the Jewish ghetto-village, Hassidism and the old way of life in general. Drawing upon popular tradition and the life of the simple and the poor, they found a treasury of literary motifs and lofty examples of virtue and sacrifice.

In the stories of Y. L. Peretz⁴¹, Y. Steinberg, M. Y. Bardichevsky and Sh. Y. Agnon these trends found their most brilliant representatives.

⁴¹ Many of Peretz's stories (like those of other Hebrew story-writers from 1881 onwards) were translated into English and into other European languages.

X

After the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which promised the Jews a "National Home" in their ancient fatherland, Palestine attracted more and more Hebrew writers. By then the Hebrew language was already spoken in the streets of the old city of Jerusalem and the young, first all-Jewish town of Tel-Aviv, as well as in the settlements and villages of Palestine. From the twenties and thirties of our century Palestine, after an interval of some seventeen or eighteen centuries, became once more the main centre of Hebrew literature.

The most important Hebrew writers settled in Palestine and their number increased from year to year. These authors, who still form the backbone of Israel's literary world, were born and bred in the diaspora. In their stories (as in their other literary works) they frequently describe their native countries, particularly dear to their hearts after the catastrophe of 1939—1945. At the same time an interesting process took place: the process of "assimilation" of European-born writers in the land of their ancestors, so familiar to them from the Bible and yet so entirely new and strange. Gradually a Palestinian Hebrew literature began to develop. It reflected the landscape, the people, the atmosphere of the ancient country and the rhythm of its revival and rebuilding at the hands of its children that „came again to their own border“ (*Jeremiah*, 31, 17).

All these trends made themselves felt also in the new Hebrew story.

Ze'eb Ya'bes (1848—1924) was the first to write stories based on the life of the Jewish settlers in Palestine. M. Smilanski excelled in stories describing the life of the Palestinian Arabs. Others based their stories on the life and customs of the various Jewish communities gathered in Palestine: Sephardic, Yemenite, Bukharian, etc.

In the last twenty years more and more writers born in Israel have been contributing towards the development of the Israeli story. It is too early to evaluate their work. No doubt their attitude towards their land and their neighbours is simpler, more natural and far removed from the kind of sentimental enthusiasm of a visitor to an exotic country, that is at times so obvious in the stories of writers born in Europe.

The young generation already boasts some significant works in the field of the short-story, notably by S. Yizhar, M. Shamir, N. Shaham, M. Tabib and others. Some of them are influenced by modern foreign literature (chiefly American, English, Russian and French) no less than by Hebrew literary traditions. They describe events petty and great, daily toils, unusual heroism and tragedies in a language simple, even rough, but sincere and devoid of false sentimentalism.

There is reason to hope that the young Israeli writers will be worthy

heirs to the long and splendid tradition of the Hebrew short-story, revived by them in the country of its origin. For is not each of them — as the poet D. Shim'oni says —

Is not this boy, hunched at the hoofs of the cow he milks,
 Scrubbing the walls of the hen-house and weeding the garden,
 Carrying on his tender shoulders the full pails,
 Pecking with the hoe the obdurate rocky soil;
 He who knows by name all the weeds and flowers
 of the village,

Who without fear wanders about in the mountains
 and explores their caves,

To whom every clod and bush of his native village is a friend —
 Is he not the scion of the tree of stout-hearted Hebrews,
 They who knew how to love their little land, ever beset,
 As if gripped with pincers, by mighty, violent neighbors,
 They who knew how to defend their native soil so heroically —
 Those threshers of wheat, those drovers, and dressers of
 sycamores,

Who have given saviors and prophets to the world?

(tr. by Prof. S. Halkin)

EWOLUCJA NOWELI HEBRAJSKIEJ

STRESZCZENIE

Short story (krótkie opowiadanie) — to jeden z najstarszych, wbrew współczesnemu terminowi, gatunków literackich znanych Żydom, mający swe źródło w długiej tradycji ustnej.

Z wysoko rozwiniętymi formami noweli hebrajskiej spotykamy się już w Biblii. Historie biblijne to właściwie najstarsze zachowane nowele; napotykamy tu też ślady obcych wpływów. Nieprzerwany rozwój noweli hebrajskiej potwierdzają apokryfy (*Tobit*, *Judith*, a zwłaszcza *Zuzanna*). Większość apokryfów *Starego Testamentu* pisana była niewątpliwie po hebrajsku, przechowały się one jednak głównie w grece i innych językach.

W okresie talmudycznym (ok. 200—500 n. e.) nowela została wchłonięta przez specyficzną formę "agadah", krótkiego opowiadania z morałem, nie związanym bezpośrednio z prawami religii Talmudu („halakhah"). Agady obejmowały praktycznie wszystkie zachowane opowiadania z tego okresu. Ich poważnym brakiem była posunięta do ostatecznych granic zwięzłość i brak ostro zarysowanych wątków. Niektóre z tematów agad przedostały się do wspólnego dziedzictwa motywów literackich wielu literatur Wschodu i Zachodu.

Wiek średni był świadkami rozkwitu noweli zarówno w literaturze powszechnej, jak hebrajskiej. Wpływ noweli hebrajskiej na nowelistykę europejską był znaczny. Wraz z chrześcijaństwem świat zachodni przejął biblijne i apokryficzne opowieści i przetworzył je literacko. Żydzi i konwertycy przekazali Zachodowi ogrom-

ne bogactwa noweli indyjskiej, perskiej, arabskiej, hebrajskiej. Większość hebrajskich nowel średniowiecza to tłumaczenia i adaptacje, trafiają się jednak i takie, które wyrosły wprost ze smutnej rzeczywistości życia Żydów w zamkniętych społecznościach.

„Zmierzch średniowiecza“ (że użyjemy określenia Huizingi) pociągnął za sobą także i zmierzch noweli hebrajskiej. Od XIV do XVII wieku, w okresie powstania i rozwoju klasycznej formy włoskiej „novella“, literatura hebrajska nie wydała nawet miernego naśladowcy sztuki Boccaccia. Tradycje średniowiecza były nadal żywe, ilość rzeczy godnych uwagi napisanych w tym okresie była jednak znikoma.

Począwszy od końca XVII wieku nowela hebrajska i literatura hebrajska w ogóle zaczęła kopiować wzory europejskie. Pierwsza nowela w nowoczesnym tego słowa znaczeniu została opublikowana w 1867 przez A. Mapu. Z innych Y. L. Gordon, P. Smolenskin, M. D. Brandstädter, a zwłaszcza R. A. Braudes przyczynili się do rozwoju noweli hebrajskiej w latach przed odrodzeniem narodowym (tj. przed 1881—1882). Z naiwnego dydaktycznego opowiadania z przesadnie skomplikowanym wątkiem, ociekającego sentymentalizmem, nowela hebrajska końca XIX i początku XX wieku przekształciła się w artystycznie dojrzałe i psychologicznie prawdziwe, wnikliwe dzieło, porównywalne ze współczesnymi nowelami europejskimi. Odnosi się to zwłaszcza do opowiadań takich pisarzy, jak Y. L. Perec, D. Frishman i in.

Odrodzenie państwowości żydowskiej w Izraelu (do 1948 w Palestynie) przyczyniło się do powstania noweli hebrajskiej, nowej zarówno językiem, atmosferą i — bardzo często — tematyką. Młoda generacja pisarzy urodzona w Izraelu dopiero debiutuje, do niej jednak należy przyszłość. Jest ona prawowitym spadkobiercą tradycji noweli hebrajskiej, sięgających 4 tysięcy lat.

Przełożył Tadeusz Rybowski