

Rewriting the Bible

by Malka Z. Simkovich

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If the Bible was a house, then the stories written by Jews in the late Second Temple period are the house's embellishments: the landscaping, the decorative flourishes, and the fixings that resolve or distract from perceived weaknesses in the original foundation.

But how did Jews at this time perceive the relationship between the foundation and its embellishments, that is, between biblical texts and what we sometimes call "post-biblical" texts?

Virtually all Jews would have agreed that the Torah contained divinely inspired retellings of Israel's earliest national history. And, sometime during the Second Temple period, Jews began to rewrite these stories about their early history. Given how many such rewritings have survived, one can only imagine how many more were composed that were not carefully preserved for two millennia.

Why Did Jews Rewrite Biblical Stories?

A number of factors motivated Jews to compose or rewrite stories related to the Bible in the Second Temple period. First, challenging questions arose when the Jews read their Scriptures. Many stories seemed to be unnecessarily detailed, while others provided minimal information that left the reader with more questions than answers. Sometimes one narrative directly conflicted with another. Other times, stories were ethically

problematic. To address these discrepancies, extraneous details, contradictions, and ethically concerning material, Jews composed stories that supplemented or revised the ones they already had.

Second, Jews who wanted to engage with the outside world sought to present their biblical heroes as individuals who embodied Greco-Roman values. To this end, they depicted figures such as Abraham as a wise philosopher, astrologer, or mathematician. These portrayals, and others like them, rebutted Greek and Roman writers who challenged the integrity of the Jewish people by circulating legends that suggested that the ancient Israelites, and the Jews of the present, were not contributors to society, but threats to its well-being.

The Legacy of Abraham

Abraham's family was a favorite subject for Jews writing in the late Second Temple period. Many authors perceived Abraham and his family as the first "Jews," and were intrigued by the adventures, conflicts, and divine encounters they experienced. Readers must have wondered how the Abrahamic family worshiped their God, and whether that worship looked similar to Jewish practices in their own day. In many retellings of the patriarchal narratives, Abraham and his descendants observe the Jewish holidays, reject idolatry, scrupulously practice circumcision, and separate themselves from pagan life. Other Jewish texts present Abraham in more universal terms, as the father of all humankind.

The Aramaic text known today as the Genesis Apocryphon was written in Judea in the late Second Temple period. Its surviving segments, discovered in one of the Dead Sea caves near Qumran, begin with the illicit relationship between angels and human women in Genesis 6:1, and close with God's promise in Genesis 15 to provide Abram with continuity by giving him both land and children.

Many of the Genesis Apocryphon's retellings diverge from the scriptural account by inserting information where there are narrative gaps. In Genesis 12, for example, when Abram and Sarai (their names become Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17) are about to enter Egypt, Abram tells his wife to inform the Egyptians that she is Abram's sister, explaining that if Pharaoh discovers that they are married, he will kill Abram. After obeying Abram, Sarai is abducted by Pharaoh's officials and brought to Pharaoh, whereupon God brings a plague on Pharaoh and his household. The plague leads Pharaoh to understand that Abram's God disapproves of his taking Sarai, and he subsequently releases her to Abram. In the biblical account, Abram expresses no concern about Sarai's welfare. In the Genesis Apocryphon, however, Abram is overwhelmed with distress following her abduction. The author also adds dramatic elements that underscore Abram's philanthropy and wisdom, as well as Sarai's beauty. The account opens with Abram having a dream on the eve of his entry into Egypt:

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And I, Abram, dreamt a dream on the night that I entered the land of Egypt. I saw in my dream a cedar tree and a palm tree...together from [one] roo[t]. People came, seeking to chop down and to uproot the [ce]dar tree and to spare only the palm tree. Now the palm tree cried out and said, "Don't cut down the [c]edar, for

both of us have [sprouted] from one root,” and the cedar tree was spared for the sake of the palm tree and was not chopped down. I awoke in the night from my sleep and said to Sarai, my wife, “I dreamt a dream... [I] am afraid [because of] this dream.” She said to me, “Tell me your dream that I may know (it).” So I began to tell her my dream and said to [her] “...dream...that they will seek to kill me and to spare you. But this is all the favour that [you can/must do for me]: every[where] that [we go say] of me, ‘He is my brother,’ that I may live for your sake and my life will be spared on your account...to ta[ke] you away from me and to kill me.” And Sarai cried at my words on that night.

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Abram dreams that men who intend to cut down a certain cedar tree abandon their plan when a palm tree begs them to spare the cedar. Upon waking, Abram understands that the cedar tree is a stand-in for him, and the palm tree symbolizes Sarai. The cedar, known for being durable and valuable, is used to build homes and other structures; Abram is likewise a strong leader whose influence makes him a valuable commodity. His survival is necessary in order to build the Israelite nation. The palm tree, known for being beautiful, delicate, and bearing delicious fruit, symbolizes Sarai, whose fertility is potentially important to the development of the Israelite nation, but whose survival is not as foundational to the Israelite people. Abram understands that as the “cedar,” he must prioritize his survival over Sarai’s survival upon their entry into Egypt. And just as the palm tree saves the cedar tree from danger, Abram recognizes that Sarai must save him by claiming to be his sister rather than his wife.

Whereas in the biblical version, Abram decides on his own that Sarai should

conceal her marriage from Pharaoh, the Genesis Apocryphon indicates that this strategy is divinely ordained through a prophetic dream, which absolves Abram of responsibility for endangering Sarai. When Sarai cries upon hearing Abram's interpretation of the dream in the Genesis Apocryphon, Abram is empathetic toward her. And after she is abducted, Abram also cries:

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That night I prayed, entreated and asked for mercy, and I said in sorrow – with my tears running down – “Blessed are you, Lord Most High, Lord for all eternities. For you are Lord and Sovereign over all. You are empowered over all the kings of the earth to mete out justice. Now, I place my complaint before you, regarding Pharaoh Zoan, king of Egypt, because my wife has been taken away from me by force. Mete out justice to him for me, and show your great hand against him and all his household; let him not be allowed this night to defile my wife for me! Then they will all know you my Lord, that you are the LORD of all the kings of the earth.” I cried and fell silent. That night God Most High sent a spirit of affliction to afflict him and all the people of his household – an evil spirit – and it afflicted [Pharaoh] and all the people of his household, so that he was unable to touch her, nor did he have intercourse with her, though she was with him for two years.

The Genesis Apocryphon's retelling of Genesis 12 features two popular motifs that appear often in Second Temple literature: divinely sent dreams or visions, and prayers uttered by a hero in a time of crisis. These tropes appear together in texts such as 2 Maccabees, when the Jews pray for salvation from Antiochus IV Epiphanes, and God

consequently sends two “remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful, and splendidly dressed” angelic messengers to attack the Greek general Heliodorus. They also appear together in the Greek version of Esther, when Mordecai dreams of a major conflict between the Jews and the foreign nations. After Mordecai interprets his dream in detail, he declares that the prayers of the Jews have led to their salvation. While 2 Maccabees and Greek Esther were written in Greek and the Genesis Apocryphon was written in Aramaic, it is possible that all three texts participate in a common interpretive tradition that transcended language and shared key themes.

Artapanus

Aware that some Greek writers described the Jews’ early history in decidedly uncomplimentary ways, many Jewish intellectuals tried to restore the integrity of the Jewish religion by portraying the Jewish Patriarchs as the greatest of heroes. One such figure was Artapanus, who lived sometime between the middle of the third century BCE and the early first century BCE.

In his rewriting of select portions of the Scriptures, Artapanus portrays biblical figures such as Abraham and Moses as mastering scientific disciplines and embodying virtues that were valued by the Greeks and Romans of his day. He also actively engages in an ongoing debate among Second Temple interpreters regarding whether Abraham studied astrology. While some, such as Philo and the author of Jubilees, praise Abraham for his rejection of astrology, Artapanus’s Abraham is an expert in astrology who teaches this discipline to the Egyptians. Josephus would later make the same claim about Abraham. As we will see later in this chapter, Artapanus likewise presents Moses as a great intellectual and formidable warrior.

The Testament of Abraham

This intriguing novella probably originated in the first century CE from the intellectual hub of Alexandria or Antioch. Scholars see the work as a humorous parody of what is known as the testament genre, a genre in which a biblical hero imparts his last words of wisdom to his children. Many medieval manuscripts of such testaments have been preserved, among them the Testament of Jacob, the Testament of Isaac, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. The Testament of Abraham, however, is different from all of these books. Instead of portraying Abraham as a wise sage serenely providing his descendants with advice on the cusp of his death, the author writes what one might call an “untestament.” In the Testament of Abraham, God sends the archangel Michael to retrieve Abraham from earth and to bring him into the afterlife, but Abraham resists Michael at every turn, prompting a despairing Michael to request that God choose someone else to carry out this task. God then sends the Angel of Death to retrieve Abraham. While he is initially unsuccessful, the Angel of Death ultimately tricks Abraham into dying by having Abraham touch him.

The Testament of Abraham features entertaining twists and turns. At times, the tone is humorous, as when Michael shows up in God’s heavenly court once again without Abraham. At other times, the tone is serious, as when Isaac learns in a dream of Abraham’s imminent death. The story comes to a climax after Abraham tells Michael that he will not willingly follow him into the afterlife unless he is shown two visions: one of all humanity, and one of how souls are divinely judged after they depart from their bodies. Michael acquiesces, and leads Abraham into a chariot that flies over the earth so that Abraham can observe all humanity. In this vision, Abraham sees people below him

committing murder, theft, and sexual impropriety. He commands that these sinners be killed, and God obliges by striking them dead. After Abraham makes three such commands, God abruptly ends the trip, explaining that, unlike Abraham, God leaves sinners alive in the hopes that they may repent:

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And he saw in another place people digging into a house and stealing other people's possessions, and he said, "Lord, Lord, command that fire may come down from heaven and consume them." Even as he spoke, fire came down from heaven and consumed them. Straightway, there came a voice from heaven to the commander-in-chief, saying thus, "Commander-in-chief Michael, command the chariot to stop! Turn Abraham away so that he may not see all the earth, for if he beheld all who live in wickedness, he would destroy all creation! For behold, Abraham has not sinned and has no pity on sinners.

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After their chariot ride, Michael takes Abraham to the place where souls are judged upon departing from their bodies. Abraham watches as sinful souls are brought to hell and righteous souls are brought to heaven. He then observes a soul who has an equal number of good and bad deeds. When Abraham and Michael pray to God on its behalf, this soul is saved and brought to heaven.

The figure of Abraham in the Testament of Abraham is clearly incongruous with the biblical image of Abraham. In fact, he is the foil of his biblical counterpart. Rather than asking God to save a city on account of a few people's good deeds, as he does in Genesis 18, Abraham insists that God should kill sinners before giving them a chance to

repent. And rather than serving God's messengers in diffident obedience, as he does when three messengers visit him in Genesis 18 following his circumcision, Abraham makes a mockery of divine messengers by repeatedly defying their orders to accompany them into the afterlife.

On the other hand, Abraham's generosity and eagerness to accommodate guests are present in both the Bible and the Testament of Abraham. It is possible that the author of the Testament of Abraham preserved these attributes to link his story with the biblical account, and to impress Hellenized Jewish (and perhaps also gentile) readers who valued these qualities. Abraham's piety in this book also underscores the ironic parody of his disobedient behavior.

Many scholars believe that the author of the Testament of Abraham was a Jew who penned a clever satire that other Jews would have found entertaining. At the same time, the author may have been targeting a gentile audience who would have found the book's humorous qualities appealing as well. Since the author makes no mention of distinctively Jewish practices, but instead emphasizes Abraham's virtues (and lack thereof), this text could have been easily enjoyed by a variety of audiences.