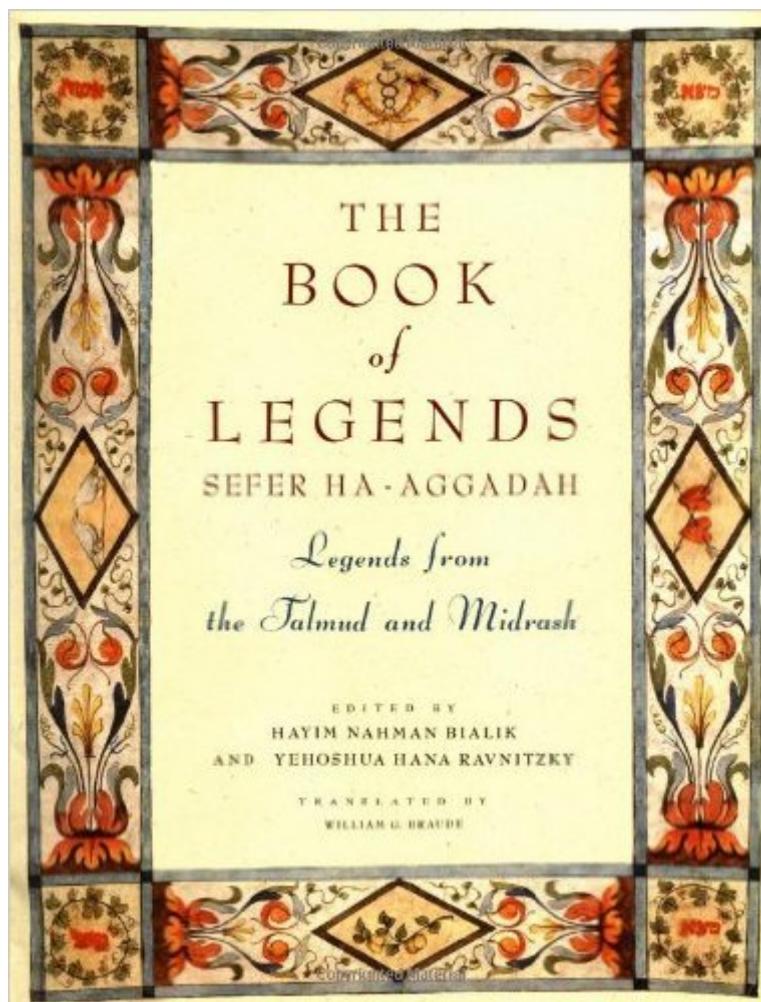


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The Book Of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends From The Talmud And Midrash



Synopsis

The first complete English translation of the Hebrew classic *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* brings to the English-speaking world the greatest and best-loved anthology of classical Rabbinic literature ever compiled. First published in Odessa in 1908-11, it was recognized immediately as a masterwork in its own right, and reprinted numerous times in Israel. The Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik and the renowned editor Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, the architects of this masterful compendium, selected hundreds of texts from the Talmud and midrashic literature and arranged them thematically, in order to provide their contemporaries with easy access to the national literary heritage of the Jewish people -- the texts of Rabbinic Judaism that remain at the heart of Jewish literacy today. Bialik and Ravnitzky chose *Aggadah* -- the non-legal portions of the Talmud and Midrash -- for their anthology. Loosely translated as "legends", *Aggadah* includes the genres of biblical exegesis, stories about biblical characters, the lives of the Talmudic era sages and their contemporary history, parables, proverbs, and folklore. A captivating melange of wisdom and piety, fantasy and satire, *Aggadah* is the expressive medium of the Jewish creative genius. The arrangement of this compendium reflects the theological concerns of the Rabbinic sages: the role of Israel and the nations; God, good and evil; human relations; the world of nature; and the art of healing. Here, the reader who wants to explore traditional Jewish views on a particular subject is treated to a selection of relevant texts at his fingertips but will soon become immersed in a way of thinking, exploring, and questioning that is the hallmark of Jewish inquiry. "Whatever the imagination can invent is found in the *Aggadah*," wrote the historian Leopold Zunz, "its purpose always being to teach man the ways of God." The *Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, now available in William Braude's superbly annotated translation, enables modern Jews to experience firsthand the richness and excitement of their cultural inheritance.

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Customer Reviews

One of the other reviewers on this website makes the bizarre and incorrect assertion that it is wrong to study aggadah (the non-legal sections of rabbinic works) without first mastering Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). This is ignorance of the highest order. Even if one were to adopt fundamentalist Orthodox Judaism, that comment is still wrong. In fact, orthodox Judaism explicitly teaches that one should study aggadah first, and then only learn Kabbalah after one is at least 40 years old. Further, the previous reviewer incorrectly charged the editors with falsely mistranslation passages in order to please a certain point of view. This is pure fiction. The fact is that the Jewish tradition has always held the aggadah in the highest esteem, and it is only among the post-16th century Ashkenazi Orthodox that we find it reduced to the pathetic state that it has been in. Fortunately, the editors of this compilation come to the rescue by presenting all the classic aggadic passages from the Mishna, both of the Talmuds (Yerushalmi and Bavli), and most of the major midrash compilations. I cannot overemphasize the ease of use; any English speaker will find it extremely easy to look up any aggadic passage based on subject or verse. Further, it is comprehensive beyond anything that I could have wished for. If you are secular, or religious Jew, this book is for you. If you a Reform Conservative or Modern Orthodox Jew, it is for you. If you are a gentile who wants to learn about Judaism, this is for you. However, as the above reviewer demonstrates, if you are an uneducated religious fundamentalist, this book may not be to your liking.

Bialik's collection is a delight to read. Filled with stories that give insight into biblical stories and Jewish history, the contents of this book add tremendous texture to Torah discussion and participation in markers of the Jewish year and Jewish life. Each week I am excited to see what the Book of Legends might have to say about the Torah portion. Were the sages troubled by the same passages I was? Did they see something completely different? The Book of Legends is also great for browsing at random. Every time I open it I find something that makes me think, laugh, or pause and scratch my head. It is an excellent addition to a primarily English speaking Jew's library.

It is hard to believe that it was only so far back as 1908 that Russian poet Hayim Bialik and editor

Yehoshua Ravnitsky put their heads together to create the *Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, a compendium of legends, history and lessons from the Talmud and the Midrash. Originally, in Hebrew (much of that translated from the Aramaic) it was finally translated into English by William Braude, appearing in 1992. Until that time, much of the material covered was only available to students of the Talmud, a loss to many generations of Jews as well as other of different faiths around the world. Irreverently, I think of 'The Book of Legends' as the 'juicy parts' redaction of the some of the most important bodies of work in the Jewish faith. The Talmud is composed of both law and legend, and the stones of that law grind exceedingly fine. To be honest, I am much more drawn to the lore and legends; because I believe it is there that the true center of the Jewish spirit can be found. Whether it be the story of Solomon's struggles with demon kind, or the thoughts of the sages on the nature of God, this is the imagination and the heart of thousands of years of belief. Am I exaggerating? I don't know. But this material has lived as oral tradition from generation to generation, and now we are able to hold it in printed form, simply to read or for research. Bialik and Ravnitsky put an immense effort into gather the material together from many diverse sources, and then managing to arrange it in such a fashion that it is accessible. The first parts are organized in accordance with Jewish biblical history, and then as the deeds of the Sages. Following sections turn to Israel's place in the world, the nature of God, man, his community and the world itself. This adds up to a mighty volume of over 800 large pages of small print. I won't pretend that this is easy reading. Much is, but just as much contains the cryptic and dense style one would expect from material that has lived long as verbal tradition. But both the original compilers and the translator have done their utmost to bring much that was almost secret into the light. For me it contains the answers to many of the puzzles of Jewish history and belief. And a whole new set of questions to ask and think about. I hope it does the same for you.

No other collection of rabbinic writings concerning the sages, their ethics, and their stories reaches the breadth or depth of this collection. This book is not meant to be read cover to cover but to be perused and explored bit by bit. This reference work has endured for over 100 years as *Sefer HaAggada* in Hebrew and captures the same enduring quality in the English.

I recently heard something that bears repeating as it relates to this treasured book, *Sefer Ha-Aggahah*. It says, in the Christian tradition, that Jesus told parables to the masses so that the veiled, deeper truths about life would be revealed to those whom sought after it. Of course, the obvious inference is that one would have to know that there is something beyond stories that make them relevant. Judaism is magnificent because its tenets provoke research. It is a progressive,

revelatory social document. Apart from the mystical elements of its semitic tongue, the stories, especially those collected by the editors, Hayim N. Bialik and Yehoshua H. Ravinitzky represent oftentimes contradictory versions from traditional accounts from the rabbis. This book, as some other reviewers have mentioned is a wonder to read. It is edited in such a way that it may be accessed by personalities or by subject. Although one should view these traditions as customs, it seems to fill many a void left by the writers of the Bible.

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