

## Volume II

### Abraham in the Furnace of Fire

The theme of “Abraham in the furnace of fire” describes how biblical Abraham was led to monotheism and how he emerged as the founder of a new religion and the father of the Hebrew nation. This description fills the gaps in the biblical story of Abraham, which makes no reference to Abraham’s life before God commanded him: “Get thee out of thy country...” The story contains a number of episodes joined together to form a complex narrative. In the first part of the story, King Nimrod learns about the anticipated birth of Abraham and tries to kill him, but Abraham’s father manages to hide him by using various stratagems. (A similar chain of events is ascribed by various traditions to Zeus, Moses and Jesus.) Abraham discovers God’s control over nature and proves to his father the triviality of the idols he sells. There follows a confrontation between Abraham, who refuses to worship idols, and King Nimrod, who orders him to do so. Nimrod throws Abraham into the furnace but, thanks to divine intervention, Abraham emerges from it alive and well.

This rabbinical story gave rise to a long narrative that unfolded in ninety-seven versions, rendered in various genres. In *Sefer ha-Yashar* (16<sup>th</sup> century) the story is structured as a medieval chivalrous romance. Ramaz (17<sup>th</sup> century) wrote a play consisting of dozens of sonnets, which was adapted into a romantic epic by Shalom b. Rabbi Jacob ha-Cohen (Redelheim, beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). In the version of *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Yemen, 14<sup>th</sup> century), the wealth of materials produced an extraordinary phenomenon: In the middle of the version, the text splits into two versions that are presented as equal alternatives (phrased as *davar aher*, “another thing,” a common midrashic idiom that signifies a homiletic alternative).

The early versions, those found in the Midrash and the Talmud, do not integrate all the episodes into a single story. In *Sefer ha-Ma’asim* of MS Oxford Bodleian (Champaign, France, 1250-1255), the story, along with most of its details, crystallizes for the first time around a martyrological telos and outside the homiletic context. This version

merged with the version of the “Midrash of the Decalogue” and as such it was adapted in over twenty-five versions of the story. Most of the other versions focus on the character of Abraham as an exemplary figure, whether in relation to his heroic exploits or by stressing the superiority of his monotheistic creed over paganism. The latter finds its expression in Abraham’s sarcastic criticism of the idolaters. The importance of this story as a basis for the monotheistic conception of the Hebrew Bible prompted Maimonides to incorporate this story in *Mishneh Torah* (12th century), his famous code of the Jewish law, in the chapter that deals with the prohibition of idolatry.

### **Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife**

“Joseph and Potiphar’s Wife” is a remarkable story about the struggle with temptation. It presents the tension between spiritual aspirations and instinctual drives as well as the striving toward awareness thereof. The earliest, prototypical biblical version describes the conflict between Joseph – a Hebrew lad employed by Potiphar, a minister in the Egyptian royal court – and Potiphar’s wife, the mistress who attempts to seduce him. The conflict reaches its peak when the scorned mistress accuses her slave of attempting to rape her and he is thrown into prison.

The story unfolds in 106 versions, beginning with Bible and up to our own days. In the course of time it was transformed in different ways, in conformity with the contemporary socio-cultural context, thus giving rise to several groups of versions.

The group of post-biblical versions of the Hellenistic period (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.) manifests changes resulting from the Jewish-Greek intercultural contact. In these versions, the narrative plot is similar to that of the Greek story of Phaedra and Hippolytus. The combination of the biblical story, along with its specific details, and the contents of the Hellenistic story produces a moralistic Jewish-religious narrative charged with the same erotic intensity that characterizes the Hellenistic story.

Within the group of Talmudic and Midrashic versions (5<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries), the version of *Genesis Rabba* is crucial for understanding the

development of the theme in the entire midrashic literature. The telos it introduces is anchored in the reality of a Jewish society that exists alongside the Christian society and is persecuted by the Christian establishment. This historical situation called for a clear-cut portrayal of a Jewish cultural icon whose human actions and spiritual power would serve as an antithesis of Jesus Christ. In this group of versions emphasis is placed on certain ethical positions concerning the struggle with the sexual drive and on the Jew's self-perception as a creature of flesh and blood that aspires to spiritual heights. The protagonist's inner conflict in the face of seduction stands for the struggle of the Jewish spirit with carnality. Also noteworthy is the occurrence of language patterns that evoke the negative side of women. This is a by-product of a pervasive medieval misogynic tendency.

The fourth group consists of post-medieval narratives. The version found in *Sefer ha-Yashar* of the seventeenth century idealizes the biblical period in medieval terms. Bearing the imprint of the romances of King Arthur and the knight-errantry tales *Amadis de Gaula*, this version portrays Joseph as the hero of a chivalrous romance, who stands for the ideals of beauty, safety, loyalty, and doing justice.

The fifth group, comprising versions from the period of the Hebrew Enlightenment, conveys a didactic tendency. For the first time Joseph is portrayed as a modern, enlightened Jew (a *maskil*), who embodies "the spirit of God" and "the spirit of man" alike, thus combining Judaism and Western culture.

The group of Hasidic tales (18<sup>th</sup> century etc.) consists of twenty-four versions. Retaining the functional similarity of the theme, they assume quite a different meaning by adopting the notions articulated in the Hasidic homilies and shaping them in a much bolder fashion. The figure of the Hasid who resists temptation serves as a literary model of proper behavior in accordance with Hasidic standards, and at the same time functions as the *axis mundi*, acting as a link between the supernal world and the earthly one. The Hasidic versions also endow sanctity to the confrontation with the seductive woman: the graver the woman's sin, the more enormous the zaddik's ordeal. The story conveys the well known mystical notion of *yeridah lezorekh aliyyah*, "a downfall for the purpose of transcendence."

The theme's last group consists of two modern versions, one by Isaac Bashevit Singer and the other by S. Y. Agnon. Both versions transform

the story into a new model of a viable co-existence of conflicting worldviews by introducing the option of a Jewish-foreign form of life as an answer to the quest for identity of the modern Jew, who fluctuates between traditional Jewish culture and western culture. In these modern versions, Joseph is portrayed in a different light than in the previous versions, and this too is a clear indication of how the theme developed from ancient times to the modern era.

### **King Solomon and Asmodeus (Ashmedai)**

The story opens with King Solomon's hybris, as a result of which Asmodeus assumes his identity and usurps his throne. Thrown out of the palace, King Solomon becomes a nomad and spends a long time wandering until he succeeds in proving his true identity, thus regaining his throne.

The theme consists of sixty-seven versions. It first appears in the Talmud, with the versions of the Palestinian Talmud stressing the moral aspect and the king's decline, while those of the Babylonian Talmud shift the emphasis to the mythic confrontation between the king of Israel and the king of the demons and resolve the conflict through the subordination of both to a Higher Power. From thence, the story unfolded in the Midrash and other sources up to the modern age. The version of Midrash Rabba on the Song of Songs (the 11<sup>th</sup> century) adds the motif of the loss of the king's magic ring and its recovery in the belly of a fish. The kabbalistic version of Rabbi Isaac of Acre (the 14<sup>th</sup> century) adds a romantic subplot about King Solomon's wandering to Amon and his relationship with the Amonite princess. The most elaborate version is found in *Oseh Pele* (compiled by Joseph Shabbetai Farhi, Italy, the 19<sup>th</sup> century). From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards there is a tendency to replace Solomon with other figures, such as a powerful official who ill-treats the Jews and after going through the traumatic experience of losing his identity regrets his wrong doings and repents. The adaptations of the story in the modern age (by Harry Sackler, M. J. bin Gorion [Berdyczewski], I. L. Peretz, and Dan Tsalka) have a romantic and mythic allure. In addition, the theme has been

incorporated in a satirical modern story about the culture of the *maggidim*, the “itinerant preachers” (Naftali Gross).

### **The Thief Who Has Given Himself Away**

The story of the thief who has given himself away may be viewed as a narrative unit within a group of stories that celebrate King Solomon’s wisdom. In this story, three merchants appear before the king to present their case. They hid their joint money in a safe place before the onset of the Sabbath but on Saturday night they realized that the money was gone, so that apparently one of them had stolen it. Now they are asking the king to judge who is the culprit. Pretending to consult with them about some other matter, the king tells them a story that is meant to help him decide their case. This is a story within a story. It concerns a woman and three men: her husband, her former fiancé, and a highwayman who intended to rape her and take her money. Each of these men made some concession so as not to humiliate or harm the woman. King Solomon asks the merchants which of these three men acted the most nobly. One of the merchants says that it was the robber, for he gave up the money that could be his. By thus displaying his own greed, this merchant has given himself away and the king accuses him of the theft.

The series of versions on this theme originates with *Sefer ha-Ma’asim* (MS dating the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Champaign).

Some think that the story does not derive from an old Midrash but was rather copied from an accommodated Hindu-European tradition that was cast in the genre of the widespread stories about King Solomon’s wisdom and assimilated certain Jewish motifs, such as the motif of the Sabbath. Some of the subsequent versions of the story enlarged upon the evil character of the thief. A case in point is the version of MS Parma (Northern France, the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century) and the version in Joseph Shabbetai Farhi’s *Oseh Pele* (Italy, the 19<sup>th</sup> century).

In some versions, the theft occurred on the Sabbath day, thus compounding the severity of the thief’s misconduct. Such is the version that appears in the *Midrash of the Decalogue* (originating in the 10<sup>th</sup>

century and reprinted many times afterwards), where it exemplifies the commandment “Thou shalt not steal.”

Beginning with the Renaissance, some versions, such as *Hibbur ha-Ma'asiyyot ve-ha-Midrashot* (Venice, 1551) and the Yiddish *Ma'aseh Bukh* (Basel 1602), elaborate the contrasts embodied in the inner story and shape them as romantic conflicts, occasionally accompanied by conventional class conflicts. The version of the *Ma'aseh Bukh* is structured as a short story about three brothers, one of whom stole their common inheritance. Later adaptations of this particular version are Bialik's in *Sefer ha-Aggadah or in Va-Yehi ha-Yom* (1933) and three documented folk versions (IFA 3217, 9122, 12711). Especially noteworthy is the version in Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia 1913), vol. 4, pp. 132-34, which is incorporated in the chapter devoted to the stories of King Solomon.

The telos of the given theme is threefold: (1) The theft is indicative of a much broader deterioration of values (in the context of the frame story); (2) According importance and validity to contracts made between people (in the context of the inner story); (3) Glorifying Solomon as a wise king who penetrates the truth and communicates a moral message.

The theme unfolds in thirty-nine versions from the 10<sup>th</sup> century to today.

### **The Loan**

The theme of “the loan,” which unfolds in thirty-two versions, contrasts two values: wealth and the service of God. The story is about a poor man known for his piety who receives several coins from Elijah the prophet to improve his commercial dealings and earn a living. Once the man gets rich, he abandons his former virtues and piety, whereupon Elijah confronts him, demanding to get back the coins. The man returns the coins, loses his fortune and then starts praying to God again. Elijah re-appears and gives him back the coins on condition that he keeps praying regularly. The man agrees, takes the coins and gets rich, only this time he is devoted to the service of God. In this story, the character of Elijah emerges as the opposite of his biblical

portrayal. If the biblical Elijah is mostly the rebuking prophet who punishes and revokes the punishment in accordance with human conduct, then this Elijah is benevolent and generous, giving a present and taking it back in accordance with human conduct. While the biblical Elijah is the prophet that rages in the name of God, the fictional Elijah in our story gives a blessing in the name of God.

The first version of the story appears in the Midrash of Ruth Zuta (c. 10th century). In the later versions, the story went through some changes. For instance, the protagonist prays ecstatically to the extent of subjecting himself to the mercy of heaven and succumbing to total poverty. Thus, paradoxically, there emerges a direct correlation between poverty and piety: the protagonist's vow to accept no gift from any man signifies his piety and at the same time it is the very reason for his poverty. Two versions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are noteworthy in putting forward the notion of re-incarnation. In these unique versions, the protagonist is portrayed as a re-incarnation of a biblical figure who maintained his virtues when he was rich but deteriorated spiritually when he lost his fortune. These versions preserve the idea that the story serves as *tikkun neshamah*, a rectification of some imperfection of the protagonist's soul in preparation for the afterlife. Another interesting version is the one incorporated in the *Ma'aseh Book* (Basel, 1602), according to which the condition set by Elijah concerns trading rather than praying regularly. This change establishes the story as a criticism on commercial life instead of a denunciation of deficient praying. An entire group of versions has been modeled upon this particular plot. This version was translated into German in Bertha Pappenheim's edition of the *Maaseh Buch* (Frankfurt, 1929).

In Gaster's edition of *Sefer ha-Ma'asim* (published in 1924, originating in a manuscript of the 13<sup>th</sup> century), there is a version that moderates the contrast between poverty and piety. In this version, the protagonist's piety finds its expression in regularly attending the synagogue for the three daily prayers, while his relapse is attributed to the mundane hassles that are an integral part of the merchant's way of life. This version is more realistic than the others and provides a detailed account of why the protagonist is unable to give back to Elijah the very same coins he received from him. Another version, originating in the same manuscript, borrows its materials from the latter version, but its features are reminiscent of the religious doctrinarian character that

marks the version of Midrash Zuta. These two versions were the forerunners of a plotline that was to be developed in a succession of versions in manuscripts and in printed anthologies.

### **Rabbi Akiba and Rachel**

There are two main traditions about the early life of R. Akiba. The first one originates in the two versions of the Babylonian Talmud, found in the tractates of *Ketubbot* (62b-63) and *Nedarim* (50a), respectively. According to this tradition, the daughter of Kalba Sabua secretly married Akiba, her father's shepherd, on condition that he would study Torah. Her furious father threw her out and vowed to give her no part of his money. Akiba spent a long time in the House of Study and returned to his home town as a prominent Scholar. When his wife came to welcome him, his students tried to take her away, but R. Akiba chided them and publicly acknowledged his great debt to her. Then her father approached him and after R. Akiba annulled his vow, his father-in-law gave him half his wealth. For 1500 years these two texts gave rise to a whole series of versions that were modeled upon either one of them or a combination of both.

The second tradition – a totally different branch of this theme – unfolded in the land of Israel. According to tractate *Abbot de-Rabbi Nathan*, what led R. Akiba to study Torah at a late age was an insight he gained from observing a stone of a well that was worn out because of the impact of the water dripping on it. This convinced him that his heart could be molded by the Torah just as the stone was molded by the water. He went to the Talmudic academy and eventually rose to prominence. Unlike the Babylonian sources of the theme, which placed the wife and her devotion at the center of the stories, the texts originating in the land of Israel excluded the wife from the story of R. Akiba's rise to prominence.

This theme consists of sixty-nine versions. As a result of the unique status of the Babylonian Talmud, most of the theme's versions followed the Babylonian branch. These versions shaped the character of the wife in line with contemporary social conventions. Thus, the versions of



*Hibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu'ah* (and other Ashkenazi versions) transformed the active, wise, and initiative figure of the wife in the Babylonian Talmud into a passive, ignorant, and simple-minded woman that totally depends on her husband's wisdom.

Though the versions originating in the land of Israel were not perceived as sufficiently independent to sustain the biography of the great *tanna*, there appeared in some places, especially in the East, from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward, certain versions that attempted to fuse the two branches, along with the contradictions between them, into a biographical whole. The writers of these versions were thus forced to be creative and sophisticated, and even to add new episodes. For example, a medieval addition to the theme was an episode in which R. Akiba's wife used a ridiculous act to desensitize her husband to mockery.

In modern times there have been some serious attempts to present a coherent narrative that unites the two branches while modifying the telos of the original versions according to contemporary values. The most outstanding attempt in this direction was made in Germany in the 1880s by Meir (Marcus) Lehman. His novel, written in the vein of the neo-Orthodoxy of the German Jews and its struggle with Reform Judaism, was followed by various adaptations and a number of epigonic works. The most successful imitation was a Yiddish novel by Solomon Rosenberg, written under the impact of the Holocaust and published in New York after World War II.

This theme has also served as a basis for four plays. One of them was composed in 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy; the second was a product of the Hebrew Enlightenment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the third, a Zionist play of the 1930; and the fourth, which is perhaps the most interesting of them, is Nathan Alterman's *Pundak ha-Ruḥuhot*, which shaped the thematic materials in quite a unique way.

### **Dama ben Netinah**

The story of Dama ben Netinah is an exemplum of honoring one's parents. The gentile protagonist loses a lot of money because the

precious stone he is scheduled to sell is at the head-rest of the bed where his father is sleeping and he will not inconvenience his father by removing it. For this considerate and respectful act he is rewarded by heaven. Some of the theme's versions provide additional examples of the protagonist's respectful conduct toward his parents. A decisive factor in shaping the successive versions of the story is the protagonist's contradictory position: while as a gentile he is outside the social framework, his conduct places him at the center of the societal moral values. Thus, from the very first renditions of this story, there is a shifting tendency to present the protagonist's deeds either as an illustration of the desirable norm or as an outstanding exemplum. Some of the succeeding versions blur this dichotomy either by underestimating the deeds or by judaizing the protagonist. Other versions choose to dwell on the non-Jewish origin of the exemplary protagonist as a criticism on the misconduct of the Jews, who fail to meet their own religious standards.

The story is rendered in seventy-one versions, beginning with the one in the Jerusalem Talmud (5<sup>th</sup> century) and its counterpart in the Babylonian Talmud (6<sup>th</sup> century), which underplays the protagonist's virtues. The manuscript versions originating in the East tend to follow the latter while the Ashkenazi ones adopt the former. The tendency to underline the dichotomy between the Jews and the gentiles and dismiss the gentile as an exemplary character reached its peak in the Midrashic *Pesikta Rabbati* (6<sup>th</sup> century). A return to the ethos of the Jerusalem Talmud, which celebrates the character of the righteous gentile, can be detected in some modern versions that accept the possibility of a righteous gentile (the romantic Berdyczewski and Rabbi Klapholz the Orthodox, 20<sup>th</sup> century).

### **Nathan of the Radiance**

“Nathan of the Radiance” is a story about resisting sexual temptation. This story has been rendered in forty-one versions. In its first two occurrences (Babylonia, the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries) it is restricted to the opening event: the sages forbid a man who is tormented by obsessive

passion for a married woman to have intercourse with her, while the physicians argue that such abstinence poses a medical risk. In his book, *Ḥibbur Yafeh me-he-Yeshu'a* (North Africa, before 1066 A.D., in Judeo-Arabic), R. Nissim of Kairouan expanded the story in conformity with the sages' position: the protagonist attempts to possess the woman by force, taking advantage of her financial dependence on him. As the story proceeds, the woman manages to dissuade him from committing such a sin and by mastering his lust he emerges as a saintly figure, with an aura of light surrounding his head or a celestial candle shining above it. This version of the story, which celebrates self-restraint, was translated into pseudo-biblical Hebrew (for the first time in Ferrare, 1557) along with the entire work and it is the one that was accepted into the narrative tradition and by the successive compilers, who felt free to introduce various stylistic changes. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Berdyczewski added orientalist features to the biblical character of the story. Three versions show affinity with the code of values of the pious Jews of Ashkenaz (the 13<sup>th</sup> century, France). In these versions, the focus of the story is not the notion of resisting temptation but rather the protagonist's return to the values of society and his acceptance of its stringent laws. One of these versions concludes the story with certain details that assume a magical character. In another version the woman makes a reference to the biblical story of Judah and Tamar in an attempt to persuade the protagonist to avoid sin. The same motif continues in two more versions (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries).

### **The Pious Man and the Tax-Collector's Son**

The theme's versions open with an apparent problem of injustice: the disparity between the dignified funeral of a tax-collector's son and the scarcely-attended funeral of a pious man. In some of the versions this instance of injustice is attributed to the way of the world, namely, the human tendency to pay respects to the rich; in others it derives from an accidental exchange of the corpses in question. The companion of the pious man is wondering about the injustice and is enlightened by two visions about divine justice that appear to him in a dream. In the first

vision, the disgraceful funeral of the pious man is presented as a punishment for a trifling sin, to be compensated for the share awaiting for him in the world to come. Conversely, the grand funeral of his counterpart serves a recompense for one good deed that he performed, while due to his bad deeds he forfeits his share in the next world and is doomed to Gehenna. In the second vision, a woman is punished for posing as a virtuous woman and is doomed to bear her punishment until Rabbi Simeon ben Shetaḥ takes her place for failing to judge severely a group of witches in Ashkelon. The pious man informs Ben Shetaḥ of this matter and the latter sentences the witches to be hanged. Later on, the witches' families take revenge of the son of R. Simeon ben Shetaḥ by bearing false witness against him.

The story thus juxtaposes human and divine justice, as well as this world and the world to come, and raises the question of theodicy. The various contexts in which the theme emerges in the course of its textual history modify the details of the story, such as the protagonists' sins and the visions of the world to come. Through the tension between human and divine justice the story creates a picture in which the deficiencies of human justice are corrected in a world of higher justice.

The entry covers forty-five versions. The story first appears in two places in the Palestinian Talmud, where it is cited in the context of the second vision. In *Beraita de-Masekhet Niddah* (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries) the emphasis is placed on further restrictions of the laws concerning the separation between men and women. Beginning with the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the story forms part of the "Midrash of the Decalogue," as an illustration of the Ninth Commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," thus shifting the telos of the story to the false testimony against the son of Rabbi Simeon ben Shetaḥ. The versions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tend to dramatize the state of mind of the pious man's companion. The version of M. J. bin Gorion (Berdyczewski) is marked by irony and social criticism against the rabbinical establishment.

### **The Sabbath-Observing Cow**

In this story, a man sells his cow to a gentile but the cow refuses to do any work on the Sabbath day. The gentile decides to return the cow to the seller and does not change his mind even when the seller persuades the cow not to observe the Sabbath, for he is not interested in a cow that has anything to do with magic. When he discovers that what the pious Jew whispered to the cow was that now that it was owned by a gentile it was no longer bound by the Sabbath laws, he converts into Judaism and attains a high standing in the Jewish community.

The forty-two versions of this story differ in their perception of the protagonist, in the depiction of the relations between humans and animals and in the kind of reality they reflect. The story is first told in the midrashic *Pesikta Rabbati* (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries), in the context of the Red Heifer, whose purifying power enhances the value of the fictional cow. This version is often cited because of the canonical value of the Midrash. In the Midrash of the Decalogue (c. the 10<sup>th</sup> century), the context of the story is Sabbath observance. Later on, beginning with the 12<sup>th</sup> century, another shift in emphasis associates the gentile with the character of the proselyte tanna Yohanan ben Torata or dwells on his conversion to Judaism and his subsequent vocation as a rabbi or as a collector and distributor of charity. A version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century identifies the seller of the cow as a Hasidic Jew, apparently in celebration of the *zaddik*, the Hassidic Rabbi, and his spiritual impact. As a story about rational animals, it suggests the importance of the cow (in the context of the red heifer or reincarnation), while a certain preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century questioned the piety of his female congregants by comparing them unfavorably with the Sabbath observing cow. As far as Jewish-gentiles relations are concerned, the Ashkenazi renditions tend to characterize them as equal and trustful (with the gentile portrayed as capable of formulating his ideas in terms of the House of Study), while in the oriental versions the relations emerge as asymmetrical, with the gentile intimidating the Jew and accusing him of sorcery.

### **Mattiah Ben Heresh**

This wonderful story of self-restraint depicts a confrontation between the Sage, Mattia Ben Heresh, and Satan, who disguises himself as a woman in order to entice him. The Sage, however, would rather have his eyes pecked out – so as to avoid temptation – than give in to the evil urge. Originating in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries, this story has been rendered in fifty-six versions, all of which share the same structural pattern and differ from each other only in the way they shape the materials. Since the motif of plucking one's eyes stands out in the Jewish corpus as an oddity, it persisted as the major feature of this story, thus serving as a stabilizing factor throughout the series. Most of the earlier versions endow the characters with a mythic character. Thus, "Mattiah's facial features were like those of the ministering angels" and the enticing woman resembles Na'amah, the sister of Tubal-Kain (whom the Sages associated with the seduction of the "sons of God" in Genesis 6, 2). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the shaping of the narrative materials underwent a definite change (whose beginning can be traced back to the Tanhuma version of the previous century). The social role of the protagonist was emphasized in a more realistic way and there was a tendency to moderate his extreme abstinence, much celebrated in the earlier versions, by channeling sexuality to the confines of marital life. From the period of the Renaissance onwards, those who adapted the story shifted its emphasis in different directions: mythic-romantic, folksy-comical, national or psychological, depending on their individual poetic and ideological preferences, but they all retained the structure of its plot.

### **The Shining Robe**

The story of the shining robe tells about three sages who are making a pilgrimage to the Temple, where an angel shows them a shining but incomplete robe. This robe – which stands for man's reward in the world to come – is meant for a certain poor and charitable man from the southern town of Ashkelon. The sages pay a visit to the man and

tell him about the robe, whereupon his wife counsels him to sell her as a slave and use the money as charity to the poor, so that the robe will be properly completed. So the wife is sold as a slave and endures a series of abusive attempts to seduce her. The story is also known as “The Sages’ Robe,” after the rabbinic figures that feature in this story, as well as “Joseph the Gardener,” after the robe’s owner.

The two major movements of the story are from the respectable center to the contemptible periphery and from imperfect reality to perfection. The first movement finds its expression, among other things, in the wife’s demotion to a still lower status. The second movement is toward the completion of the robe in the world to come, which signifies the couple’s attainment of perfect righteousness.

The first version of the story appears in *Hibbur Yafeh me-ha-Yeshu’a* (Rabbi Nissim of Kairouan, North Africa, the 11<sup>th</sup> century). This version is rooted in Jewish life in the Islamic countries, where female service work in the house of strangers was a common and necessary means of providing for the family. In Renaissance Italy, *Hibbur Yafeh* was translated into biblical-flavored Hebrew (Ferrara, the 16<sup>th</sup> century), and this version was accepted by all the compilers of Jewish narrative collections in the countries of the East. The Ashkenazi branch of the story, which originated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, adds the detail that in order to be sold as a slave, the wife had to travel overseas. This addition required a further addition: the revelation of Elijah to the wife so as to circumvent the geographical distance and maintain the unity of action. Modern literary adaptations of this theme added romantic or fantastic nuances, while the counterpart folk adaptations introduced the local color of different times and places – so much so that a recent oral version places the protagonists in an immigrants’ settlement near modern-day Ashkelon.

The theme has been traced in thirty-two versions.