

## REVIEWS

Hasan-Rokem, Galit and Ithamar Gruenwald (eds.). *Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews: Ancient Jewish Folk Literature Reconsidered* (Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology). Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 2014. Notes, Index. 182 pp. Price \$44.99 (hardback). ISBN 978-0-8143-4047-9. Price \$24.99 (eBook). ISBN 978-0-8143-4048-6.

Louis Ginzberg's early twentieth century monumental opus *Legends of the Jews* (1909) is a synthesis of aggadah from classical rabbinic literature and ancient folk legends that find their origin in a variety of cultures. Ginzberg's extensive multi-volume collection helped shape American conservative Judaism and to this day counts as one of the landmarks in modern Jewish literature and one of the seminal works of Jewish folklore. Galit Hasan-Rokem's and Ithamar Gruenwald's edited English volume (following the publication of a Hebrew edition) offers a range of reflections on Ginzberg's *Legends*. The major part of the collection of scholarly essays (five of them) comes out of two plenary sessions that met at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the World Association of Jewish Studies held in celebration of the centennial anniversary of *Legends* in Israel in 2009. The essays (seven in all) address the *Legends*' repercussions in contemporary scholarship. The contributors have different backgrounds and are the leading scholars in their respected fields. Thus, the essays offer a wide variety of perspectives on Ginzberg's work from historical, philosophical philological to methodological. They hold the work and its author in high esteem, discussing the work's monumental character, but also its weaknesses and strengths, with an eye towards the folkloristic underpinnings of the work.

The book opens with a preface by one of the co-editors Hasan-Rokem and an introduction by Rebecca Schorsch, both of which highlight the folkloric narrative character of Ginzberg's *Legends*. While the preface explains the purpose of the collection and provides an adequate overview of the included chapters, the introduction discusses in depth why and how Ginzberg's work came about. In addition, Schorsch lauds the work's significance within

Jewish literature as a catalyst for an American Jewish renaissance, as well as its impact upon American Jewry's cultural and religious struggles. Schorsch argues that with his work, Ginzberg wanted to demonstrate that the Jewish people have a rich cultural history that demanded literary canonization, which is also evidenced by his use of extensive notes. In addition, she points out how Ginzberg's use of folklore demonstrated the broad cultural connections between Jews and the people of the Middle East and Europe. Moreover, she emphasizes that this collection of Jewish folklore aimed to underline Jewish uniqueness yet universality. However, Schorsch also concludes that Ginzberg, because of the anthological and encyclopedic nature of the work, fails to make Jewish readers "feel." Nevertheless, the author lauds Ginzberg's invaluable contributions of preserving the traditions of the Jewish past. By pointing to the articles following her introduction, Schorsch makes it clear that Ginzberg's work continues to have an influence on contemporary Rabbinic and folkloric scholarship, but that the contributors do not hesitate to indicate the work's limitations. The subsequent chapters thus offer a variety of perspectives and highlight different aspects of the work and its contexts.

In the first chapter of the volume, David Golinkin focuses on Ginzberg's life and career and reviews the reception of his opus and the author's own reflections on it. In Chapter Two, Hillel Newman introduces Ginzberg's doctoral thesis on aggadic literature in the writings of early Christian Church Fathers as a source for his later project and shows how Christian authors borrowed and adapted Jewish legends. In the next chapter, Daniel Boyarin employs theoretical models from folklore research to discuss the broad ideological, theological, philosophical, and intercultural context of the work. Referring to Ginzberg's roots in Romanticism, Boyarin argues that Jews have folk literature as do other peoples. Jacob Elbaum's essay provides a broad overview over the chronological span of Ginzberg's work, from the time of the Second Temple to the end of the Middle Ages. In conjunction, he reviews the tradition of Jewish and Hebrew anthologies and the characteristics of the genre in general. In addition, Elbaum discusses Ginzberg's choices in selecting texts for his anthology (not all of them from the Jewish

tradition) as well as editorial decisions and folkloric considerations. In his own essay, the editor Hasan-Rokem identifies Ginzberg as a scholar of folklore as the author of *Legends* himself, as well as his contemporaries and students of his work have done. Hasan-Rokem points to Ginzberg's use of the narrative genre to explain the author's choice of the term "legend" and his use of the comparative method so prevalent in folklore studies at the time. On the other hand, Ithamar Gruenwald, co-editor of the volume, approaches Ginzberg's corpus critically and views the author's genre category of "legend" as problematic in regards to the concept of the work which, for him, constitutes a disconnect to the belief system and ritual practices of Jews. The last essay of the volume by Johannes Sabel examines the German manuscript of *Legends*, which was only recently discovered in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York. He focuses on Ginzberg's selection of the materials that make up a unified linear narrative and analyzes selected passages from the manuscript. In addition, Sabel discusses Ginzberg's mixed usage of English and German, which he explains with Ginzberg's diasporic situation. Moreover, Sabel discusses the differences between the German and English versions, concluding that the German version is the source for the later English version. As in some of the other essays, Sabel also explains Ginzberg's choice of the term "legends," which he traces back to the Grimms' use and categorization of the term and the similar sacred legend of the Jewish midrashim.

This book offers the most current scholarship on *Legends* and thus will be a valuable resource and necessary secondary reading for any scholar who researches and teaches Ginzberg's work. Anyone who studies *Legends* should consider this collection as a supplement to the primary text. All of the essays laud Ginzberg and his monumental work but do not shy away from marking its limitations, and in this lies the value of this collection. Moreover, it is the diversity of the discussed contexts of the work by a group of diverse scholars, together with an introductory and summarizing discussion of *Legends* and its author by Schorsch, that make this book invaluable. In addition, while this volume offers us insights into contemporary scholarly discourse of Ginzberg and his corpus, it also

offers a broader discussion of the role of folklore in Judaism in general while addressing “aggadah in a folkloristic perspective” (xviii) in a narrower sense.

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