

The Birth of the Bible, by Immanuel Lewy

Reviewed by Theodor Gaster From issue: July 1951

Who Wrote the Bible?

The Birth of the Bible: A New Approach.

by Immanuel Lewy.

Bloch. 234 pp. \$2.50.

When the prophet Nathan addressed to David the famous words, "Thou art the man" (II Sam. 12:7), he could little have suspected, for all his prophetic powers, that some three thousand years later someone would apply the same words to *him*, albeit in a somewhat more complimentary sense. For what Dr. Immanuel Lewy claims, in this ingenious book, is that Nathan was not only *the* man but, in fact, the superman who virtually created the prophetic type of religion and who was responsible for the original draft both of the Pentateuch and of the Books of Samuel, not to speak of taking time out to compose the Book of Ruth.

Nathan, says Dr. Lewy, was the inspired advocate of a refined, bloodless, universalistic, spiritual, aniconic, and entirely moral form of religion, and in order to inculcate his teaching into the mind of his pupil Solomon, he took it upon himself to compile and edit a "purified" version of Israel's traditional lore and—as the Bible itself intimates (I Chron. 29:29, II Chron. 9:29)—a historical work dealing with the reigns of David and Solomon.

Nathan's compilation, however, was markedly at variance with the spirit which prevailed in priestly circles. The priests, says Dr. Lewy, objected to his rarefied and sublimated view of God, to his derogatory attitude towards the machinery and significance of the sacred cult, and to his rejection and elimination of those grosser elements of ritual and doctrine for which they were anxious to establish or fabricate an ancient authority. They therefore took pains to adapt his account to their own outlook, adding, interpolating, and often re-introducing those cruder features of the traditional legends which Nathan had carefully excised. Dr. Lewy's work is, in effect, an attempt to "bring a clean thing out of an unclean"—to distinguish nucleus from later accretions.

Some of the results are, to say the least, startling. In Nathan's version, we are informed, there was no serpent in Eden, and the tree of forbidden fruit was the tree of love or sexual knowledge. Woman (who was *not* called Eve) was tempted not by the "subtil beast" but by Adam or simply by the luscious appearance of the fruit. Cain and Abel (who is identical with both Jabal and Jubal) quarreled over their sister Naamah, not over the relative value of meat and cereal offerings; our present version of the tale is a priestly distortion. When Noah emerged from the ark, he did *not* sacrifice to God, as our present text has it, because—in Nathan's view—delight in the flesh of animals was inconsistent with the character of a benign Deity who so loved his creatures that he swore never again to destroy them! The Ten Commandments, which time-honored tradition had associated with Moses, were represented in Nathan's narrative by a versified series of moral precepts; our present versions are

priestly expansions. Balaam was, in Nathan's version, a believer in Jehovah who refused to yield to the blandishments of Balak, king of Moab, and could not bring himself to curse Israel. It was the priests who made him a pagan seer miraculously "converted."

Dr. Lewy's case is argued with ardor and vigor, and his presentation is informed with a nobility of spirit, a warmth of human feeling, and a sensitive, penetrating insight which is indeed refreshing. Nevertheless, it is the product of a scholarship in which artistic imagination has not been tempered by scientific control; and scholars will rightly object that the age is long since past when Biblical history and criticism can be based upon such purely subjective criteria.

The plain fact is that we know very little about Nathan or his philosophy, and what Dr. Lewy is actually doing is to substitute for our meager and imperfect knowledge a highly colored portrait (based largely on a fusion of three distinct Biblical Nathans!) of the kind of man who might have preached the kind of religion which a modern generation might be expected to relish. Anything in the Scriptural narrative which is in harmony with that religion is then promptly attributed to this imaginary author, while anything which is at variance with it is assigned to the manipulations of less progressive ecclesiastics. At the end of his exposition, Dr. Lewy is, of course, able to claim that his argument has proceeded on logical lines—forgetting entirely that its initial premise may have been utterly false.

Quite apart from this and many more technical difficulties, there are two general but decisive objections to Dr. Lewy's thesis. The first is that you cannot legitimately read present-day standards of morals and ethics into an earlier age. What may appear to our own and Dr. Lewy's developed outlook as inconsistencies and incongruities may not have appeared in the same light to our remote ancestors. To the primitive mind, for example, divine love need not have implied the corollary of gentleness; it could have been asserted in fury and even in savagery. Accordingly, when an ancient story so portrays it, it by no means follows that the story must have been written by two or more authors. Similarly, things like trial by ordeal or judgment by oracle were—and are—to the primitive a perfectly sound expression of what he understands by justice, and the fact that they are repugnant to us does not mean that even the most advanced of ancient thinkers need have seen anything immoral in them. By the same token also, a god who loves his creatures may nevertheless have fed on meat, simply because hunting was not regarded as murder. After all, even in our day, the Pope—who is regarded as the vicar of a loving God—is not therefore a vegetarian!

Then, too, it must be remembered that the development of moral ideas does not proceed in a rigidly chronological sequence; there is always a considerable overlap; and both primitive and advanced concepts usually exist side by side at the same time and often in the same mind.

The second major objection to Dr. Lewy's thesis is that it fails altogether to appreciate the hold which a traditional tale exerts upon the popular mind. Every standard feature of such a tale acquires a kind of canonical sanction and, although minor modifications certainly take place, any radical tampering with it, in the interests of doctrinal propaganda or even of innocent embellishment, is immediately recognized and immediately resisted. No modern child, for instance, will stand for Little "Blue" Riding Hood merely on Senator McCarthy's say-so, nor, even if Cardinal Spellman were himself to tell him so, would he be lightly persuaded that Puss wore bishop's gaiters or that it was Antichrist, and not Humpty Dumpty, who fell off the wall.

Now, many of the stories in the Book of Genesis are, in fact, mere Hebrew versions of folk tales told elsewhere in the ancient Near East and likewise paralleled in several other parts of the world. It is therefore scarcely to be assumed that anyone reared on those tales would have stomached the bowdlerized and emasculated versions

of them which Dr. Lewy attributes to the high-minded and indefatigable Nathan, or have failed to object to the excision and adaptation of familiar features. Thus, Noah's sacrifice on emerging from the ark is part and parcel of the original tale of the Flood, and appears already in the Babylonian version; any omission of it on Nathan's part would therefore at once have excited comment. Similarly, the tale of a man who wrestles with a spirit is paralleled in the folklore of many countries, so that Nathan could scarcely have expected anyone familiar with traditional lore to have tolerated the "purified" version suggested by Dr. Lewy, in which the patriarch Jacob struggled, beside the ford of Jabbok, not with a spirit but with a human being. In other words, traditional tales are characteristically more primitive than the people who retell them, but those people are characteristically conservative about them. A man of the genius which Dr. Lewy ascribes to Nathan could never have been so foolish as to imagine that he could inculcate religious truths by convincing the infant Solomon that Old Mother Hubbard found a box of wheaties.

Lastly, it is to be feared that Dr. Lewy too frequently rests his case on a cavalier attitude towards the Hebrew text of the Bible. Where a passage is completely unintelligible, and where the Ancient Versions provide no help, it is, of course, permissible to resort to conjectural emendation. But to alter a straightforward text simply because it does not square with a preconceived interpretation is a procedure which condemns itself. Yet, in discussing Jacob's blessing on Joseph (Gen. 49:22-26), Dr. Lewy emends no less than fifteen out of a total of sixty-one words—that is, approximately one in every four! And in the case of the oracles of Balaam he takes even more violent liberties. That text, for example, mentions "the children of *Sheth*" (Num. 24:17), who have now been identified with the nomadic Shûtu, of the 2nd millennium BCE. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the received reading is authenticated by a paraphrase in Jeremiah 48:45, Dr. Lewy promptly emends it to read "the children of [*Pele*] *sheth*," i.e. the Philistines, and on this basis finds confirmation of his theory that the oracles were really written centuries later!

If, however, Dr. Lewy's book is read not as a scientific treatise but simply as an artistic appreciation of Biblical storytelling, and if its erratic central thesis be overlooked, it will be found to be by no means unrewarding for its freshness of approach and its aesthetic sensibility.

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Commentary

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