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Book reviews, Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions among the Semites, by Julian Morgenstern; The Hebrew Myths, by Isaac B. Shapiro, correspondence, 1960.

The Macmillan Company

CABLE ADDRESS
PACHAMAC NEW YORK

Publishers

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Sixty · Fifth Avenue · New York 11, N. Y.

RELIGIOUS BOOK DEPARTMENT

June 17, 1960

GUY BROWN
DIRECTOR AND EDITOR

Dr. Daniel Jeremy Silver
THE TEMPLE
East 105th Street & Silver Park
Cleveland 6, Ohio

Dear Dr. Silver:

Some time ago in chatting with your father, he mentioned that you might be willing to help us out on an occasional reading of a manuscript. I kept that idea in the back of my mind against the time when a project might come along for which we would want sound judgment from an outside reader.

It so happens that there are two book projects in hand on which I would welcome the sound judgment of a competent and impartial reader.

The first one is by Julian Morgenstern: RITES OF BIRTH, MARRIAGE, DEATH AND KINDRED OCCASIONS AMONG THE SEMITES. It is 363 pages in length with about 200 pages of documentation in the appendix. I suppose you may wince just a bit at such a request, which is very much like asking someone to edit the prophecy of Isaiah. But, I hope you will agree to evaluate the importance of this project as I am sure that your reaction and advice will be most helpful to us.

The second project by Isaac B. Shapiro (a Chicago Lawyer) is really a Dictionary of Old Testament personalities. Oddly enough, his title is THE HEBREW MYTHS. Although the script is over 500 pages in length, I would suppose that a sampling here and there would suffice in the matter of giving us a glimpse of its reliability and importance.

We are agreed to pay \$55. for the combined reading and your reports on these book projects. If you are agreeable, please let me know and we shall send both MSS. to you by express, prepaid. After you have read them, you might return them by express, collect. Upon the receipt of your reports, our accounts department will forward a check in the amount of \$55.

Your identity as the reader will be kept in confidence.

Since I shall be leaving for Denmark next Friday, I do hope to have your reply before this departure. Of course, I hope that it can be in the affirmative.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Brown
Guy Brown

GB:ah

P.S. We shall not need the reports prior to August 1st. However, they would be acceptable as early as you can conveniently prepare them.

June 20, 1960

→ Mr. Guy Brown
The Macmillan Company
60 Fifth Avenue
New York 11, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Brown:

I will be happy to read the two books, although they both sound somewhat formidable, and I will attempt to have some statement to you on them by August 1.

With warmest personal regards, I remain

Most cordially yours,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

DJS:lg

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RELIGIOUS BOOK DEPARTMENT

GUY BROWN
DIRECTOR AND EDITOR

June 21, 1960

Dr. Daniel Jeremy Silver
THE TEMPLE
East 105th Street & Silver Park
Cleveland 6, Ohio

Dear Dr. Silver:

I am delighted to have your letter of June 20th indicating your willingness to read both typescripts. We shall send them along by Express, prepaid. So that you will not incur any expense in their return, you might dispatch them by Express, collect. Dr. Morgenstern's project, at least, ought prove to be worth the time required to read it.

With every good wish to you and your elder associate for whom I have the greatest esteem,

Yours sincerely,

Guy Brown
Guy Brown

GB:ah

July 11, 1960

Mr. Guy Brown
The Macmillan Company
60 Fifth Avenue
New York 11, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Brown:

I have read with benefit and pleasure Dr. Julian Morgenstern's "Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions among the Semites". It is a truly impressive piece of erudition - completely on a par with the material for which Dr. Morgenstern has long been respected.

It is Dr. Morgenstern's theory that many Biblical rites involving birth, circumcision, child-naming, marriage, death, burial, etc. have their origin in primitive taboos designed to protect the individual during these physically or emotionally dangerous periods of life. The work is ethnological, with anthropology used largely to interpret and evaluate Biblical materials.

Dr. Morgenstern believes in progress. He has not made the mistake of many earlier critics in presuming that these early taboos lingered effectively, even, indeed, omnipresently. Despite evidence that Hebrew culture retained rites which can be traced to such origins, he recognizes that such practices can be and, indeed, were reinterpreted and that often the original motivation was entirely lost from conscience.

Few can argue with Dr. Morgenstern's feeling that the pre-Semitic world was steeped in animism and a belief in spirits. Many will undoubtedly criticize Dr. Morgenstern for his attempts to elucidate the origins of Jewish holidays, especially the Passover, as periods in which the ghost world came closest to man. Yet I suspect that there will be more piety than scholarship in these complaints.

I am not as convinced as Dr. Morgenstern of the "sure onward rush of human existence", but this philosophic difference in no way

Mr. Guy Brown

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July 11, 1960

mitigates the value of the material. The style is excellent. The material is readable. Any criticism I might have would center on its length. I suspect that a full forty percent of the text is directly quoted in extenso from important earlier sources. This is inevitable, I suppose, when a Biblical scholar must rely on the field research of others, but it does give to the book the aspect of a graduate thesis rather than what it is, an important original contribution.

Dr. Morgenstern is one of the last in the chain of classic Biblical critics whose only mistake, in my eyes, is that they expend an over-abundance of energy on questions of origin and devote too little of their unquestioned skills to the intellectual and spiritual revolution which caused Israel to sever almost every tie with its Semitic past.

I commend the book to you most highly.



Cordially yours,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

DJS:lg

P.S. I am returning to you the manuscript by separate cover. I spot-checked the footnotes from my library and they were altogether accurate.

DJS

July 12, 1960

Mr. Guy Brown
The Macmillan Company
60 Fifth Avenue
New York 11, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Brown:

Jewish tradition prohibits the mixing of meat and milk. In Biblical research it is equally inappropriate to mix the meat of research with the milk of piety. Mr. Isaac Shapiro, in "The Hebrew Myths", serves up a potpourri which is neither critical nor accurate. Indeed, he lacks even the saving grace of old-fashioned piety.

"The Hebrew Myths" purports to be a dictionary of Biblical personages. Mr. Shapiro intends to go beyond the text to produce a "literary, critical and comparative analysis". This is to be no mere reporting of the Biblical narrative, a la "Dictionary of the Bible" which Dr. J. P. Davis published in 1929. Rather his intention seems to be a biographic dictionary brought up to date according to the light of current scholarship. Unfortunately, he is no scholar. Despite the prodigious effort which the manuscript involved, Mr. Shapiro's knowledge of critical and comparative Biblical research is that of a seminary sophomore.

The book is filled with omissions, inaccuracies and misinterpretations. To cite several examples, he presumes that Joshua "organized a complete conquest of Canaan and then divided up the land by lot". This assertion runs in the face of all known fact. He presumes Koheleth to be an historical personage. He accepts entirely the Talmudic fancy that Ecclesiastes was written by Koheleth in his old age, and he passes off this philosophy as "little more than the unimportant, irreligious musings of a dissipated old man". He is unaware that the concluding verses of Ecclesiastes are an obvious postscript added by some later hand.

Mr. Guy Brown

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July 12, 1960

Perhaps the most amazing of these misunderstandings is the statement that "Amos was the first of the writing prophets, writing because he was warned no longer to speak in Israel." The origin of this utter nonsense escapes me. I suspect Shapiro is reflecting a Jewish tradition which distinguishes those prophets of whom we have actual spoken texts from those whose activity only is reported.

The type-script is full of irrelevancies and misspellings. The style is halting and lugubrious. The work is utterly without bibliography or foot-noting. It testifies only to the truth of the adage that 'to the making of books there is no end'.

Perhaps the folly of this work can best be underscored by citing Shapiro's critical explanation of Nathan's interest in Solomon: "He became particularly attached to Bath Sheba's son Solomon, whose succession to the throne he engineered as compensation for the death of Bath Sheba's first born." The last Biblical commentator to hold this view was a twelfth century pious exegete who knew little of the early history of Israel, less of the economic and political realities of history, and nothing at all of critical scholarship.

Cordially yours,

DANIEL JEREMY SILVER

DJS:lg