

OF BOOKS, MEN AND IDEAS

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With this critique of a current best seller, TRADITION inaugurates a new Department, which will examine Jewish themes in contemporary literature. Dr. Wohlgelernter, the Contributing Editor of this Department, is assistant professor of English at Yeshiva University and rabbi of the Inwood Jewish Center. The author of many articles and reviews, he is best known for his widely acclaimed book, *Israel Zangwill — A Study*.

THE TELL AT TELL MAKOR —

or Mr. James Michener's History of the Jews

The novel, David Daiches tells us, "has become so dominant a literary form that anybody who has anything at all to say is tempted to present it as a work of fiction . . . These novels — or we should rather call them 'pseudo novels' — are in part stories of the kind the author wishes to draw to our attention as a social critic or a moralist or historian." Having previously drawn so much of our attention to Hawaii, Mr. James Michener now turns our sights on Israel in *The Source*,* a sprawling pseudo-novel which has headed the best seller lists for over a year. What he is giving us here are some 909 pages of fact disguised as fiction.

To gather all of these facts, Michener had to do his homework, if not adequately, at least consci-

entiously. Resourceful, he made an extended tour of the source of Jewish history — the Holy Land. Like his protagonist John Cullinane, of Chicago's Biblical Museum, who heads this well financed archeological expedition, the author leads us to Tell Makor, the fictional source, "where the growth of civilizations had begun" and "where living creatures had crouched two thousand years before." At that "primeval spot," he begins to dig for "the ultimate secrets of Jewish history."

To help the reader get at these secrets, Michener invents characters like Sir Tewfik Tabari, O.B.E., an Arab leader; the "petite, beautiful, bright eyed" Dr. Vered Bar-El, Israel's "top expert in dating pottery sherds;" Dr. Ilan Eliav,

* *The Source*, by James A. Michener, New York, Random House, 1965.

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official governmental "watchdog of the dig," and sundry others who, together with Cullinane, begin the long, arduous task of digging beneath the "tell" which "contained seventy-one feet of accumulation laid down during eleven thousand years," or, from 9834 B.C.E. to 1964. Aside from Cullinane's infatuation with Vered and the hilarious description of the arrival in Israel of the pompous Paul J. Zodman, the Chicago financier who allocates funds for this expedition, there is little here in the way of plot. What is immediately obvious, therefore, is that the author, in order to hold the attention of the "ordinary" reader, has superimposed a superficial story on his ultimate purpose: "to turn up something which will tell [him and] them more about Judaism." Michener, apparently, is begging to be judged as an historian as well as a novelist. And as an historian, one is forced to admit sadly, he ought to be considered, at least in this work, a novelist.

To be sure, art may, at times, seize the essence of personae and movements no less truly, and certainly far more vitally, than a scientific generalization unifies a chaos of phenomena. But that can only occur, as George F. Kennan cogently observes, when the true historian — be he novelist or craftsman — sees reality "as a series of facts which he cannot create or order as his heart desires but must put together according to the rigorous and confining rules of his craft whose art, when it is art at all, is epic, not dramatic." And Michener's art, when it is art at all,

is, perhaps, dramatic, never epic. That is due, primarily, to his desire to order his facts in such a way as to please *all* of his host of "ordinary" readers, however divergent their views and tastes.

To titillate this vast audience, Michener tells them what is current and popular and acceptable. Recognizing, for example, at Level IX of the XV Levels that scale the entire dig, during the reign of Herod, that, only because of "these bearded and intransigent men" who would rather suffer martyrdom than serve strange Roman gods, "Judaea and perhaps the whole empire would find its moral stability," Michener has Cullinane, the Irish Catholic, and Eliav, the Israeli watchman, agree, in the latest spirit of ecumenism, "that Catholics, Arabs, Jews, have got to work out some sensible pattern of life for the world." Or, describing, not without justifiable awe, the heroic stand of the small band of Jews in the Palestine of 1948 as the result of a "peculiar grace [which] had always been accorded those who died at alien hands while still proclaiming belief in the oneness of God," the author makes certain that some nameless Israeli exclaims: "I'm dedicating my life to the proposal that we can establish some kind of Jewish-Arab federation in this area, to the benefit of both." "Grace" may thus be suddenly lost but that is of little import, as long as the multitude applauds.

And nothing, apparently, moves the "ordinary" reader to rush to the nearest bookstore, here and abroad, as much as an ignominious

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attack on the Talmud and tradition. In a highly interesting dialogue between a Sabra and Reb Itzik, the Vodzher Rebbe, Michener relates how the latter, pleading with his young friend not to base his whole philosophy of Jewish history solely on the events that took place during the "war of liberation," since it consists of other factors, more significant and more telling, which took place during the intervening years — some two thousand of them — when the Jews were forced, however tragically, to live in such countries as Poland and Russia, adds: "What happened to them there has determined their history, their character. Would you erase Mainmonides, who lived in Egypt? And Baal Shem Tov, who lived in Poland? And the Vilna Gaon, who lived in Lithuania?" The youngster, unaware or uninterested or uninspired, and with fashionable arrogance — retorts: "You Rabbis have made the Talmud a prison of the spirit, and if we have to surrender what goodness there is in the Talmud to break out of that prison we'll do so. Then go back to pick up what's good and necessary." As if, one might add, there would be anything "to pick up" when two millenia of tradition were wiped away, by spurious logic, or ignorance, or sheer stupidity, in one fell swoop. But such sweeping generalizations obviously captivate the popular mind.

But not everyone is captivated by such material. For people with a better understanding and closer commitment to the true revelations of Jewish history, Michener has different things to say. When,

for instance, Cullinane, realizing that "as a man who would spend ten years excavating at Makor it behooved him to know as much as he could about the civilization that he was exhuming," silently slips unnoticed into a Friday evening service at some nearby village *shtibel*, he is moved by the simple but genuine piety of the worshippers; he becomes aware, suddenly, that Judaism, traditionally at least, "must be the only major religion that doesn't stress beautiful temples. Perhaps it has something more important . . . a sense of participating brotherhood, of unity in diversity." Or, when Rav Asher, returning to Tverya after silencing an exhausting internal dispute at Makor, reflects soberly "how *once* he had been misled into thinking that the building of a synagogue was the chore God demanded of him and he did not propose to be diverted by minor political troubles; his job was to build a fence around the Torah and to explain both the fence and the Torah to the young students at the yeshiva."

Or, to cite two further examples: Michener, describing the Crusades, has one of its leaders Count Volkmar whose family had lived in the Jewish homeland for two centuries turn to a bearded Jew and ask. "Why do we hate you Jews so deeply?" The answer is swift and direct: "Because we bear testimony that God is One. We were placed among you by God to serve as that reminder." And when Schwartz, the secretary of *Kibbutz Makor* invites Father Vilspronck, "who has begun his labors in the Holy Land intending to assemble the testimony

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that would reinforce Christianity . . . and ultimately to convert the Jews," into his room, the priest is suddenly and embarrassingly confronted with a large banner hung in the mess hall on which is boldly inscribed: *We did so crucify him*. And, anxious to let us know that he is aware of some prevailing views concerning the Papal visit to Israel, the author has this *kibbutznik* comment: "It is preposterous for any Pope to come here distributing a forgiveness which is not his to dispense. For two thousand years we Jews have been abused by Christians and it is not their prerogative to forgive us. For them to do so is humiliating both to them and to us, for we are the ones who should forgive them." These, and similar views, of course, cover those who do not equate Jewish history with book sales promotion.

But what also lies starkly uncovered throughout this prolix pseudo-novel are, unfortunately, errors which, if he had had his homework checked more carefully, Michener would never have made. Despite an obvious display of wide, if superficial, reading in history, comparative religion, sociology, mythology, ritual and romance, mistakes abound everywhere. To imply, as does the author, that Buber's terminology of "I — Thou" and "I — It", first used in 1924, could be extended to the thinking of the cave men of 9834 B.C.E. (p. 80); to claim that "The Torah did not sponsor such beliefs as immortality, resurrection, and heaven as a place of reward" (p. 451); to state that Maimonides is the one who said "God is near to everyone

who turns to Him, He is found by anyone who seeks Him and turns not aside" (p. 618); to believe that "Rashi passed the oral law on to Maimonides" (p. 442); to declare "that a widow of a dead man who leaves no children must not remarry until her dead husband's brother gives his consent *in writing*" (p. 854); these, and other egregious mistakes, too numerous to mention, would make even a Sunday schooler blush for shame.

Pitiful, too, are Michener's comments about the laws of marriage, divorce, the acceptance into the fold of those of Cochin who claim to be Jews, *Yibum*, *Chalitzah*, and other intricate halakhic problems facing modern Israel. He displays not only a lack of knowledge but also an unbecoming genuflection to the uninitiated everywhere whose derisive comments about *Halakhah* display as much arrogance as illiteracy about the nature of Talmudic thought. Exasperated, one can only recall Eliav's acid comment on Cullinane's ranting — imagine! — against Jewish law: "You're wrong. You've been digging in Judaism but you haven't tried to understand it." Alas!

If *The Source* is not good history, neither is it good fiction. A novel, Mr. Daiches tells us further, "is good only if the whole pattern of expression (and this would include both style and plot) is adequate to achieve, continuously and cumulatively, that symbolization of event and character which alone distinguishes literature from journalism. Implication, enrichment of meaning, reverberating significances, are achieved by the artist

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through the way he handles his medium, in such a way that *what* he says and *how* he says it are indistinguishable." To be sure, *what* Michener says may be distinguishable for the "ordinary" reader but *how* he says what he says is flat, turgid, and undistinguished. Except for some passages at the beginning of the book dealing with the conflict between the gods Moloch and Astarte, or death and birth, little of the writing here captures the imagination. The good writer of fiction, we know, creates insights which are unique because they are not communicated directly but through the symbolization of conflict, character, plot, and all the other elements in a story. *The Source*, unfortunately, does not provide anything near this ultimate fictive purpose. Like Leon Uris' *Exodus*, it offers insights which might just as gainfully be obtained in, happily, fewer pages, from a perusal of the *New York Times*. What we have here, therefore, is not art but rhetoric whose effectiveness will weaken and, predictably, disappear with the lapse of time.

To be sure, if so much of present fiction consists of what has been called pseudo-novels, or, in Horace Gregory's trenchant phrase, "costume-novels," this does not mean to say that it is valueless. Many such novels contribute valuable information or interesting ideas. But if history, or politics, or religion, or social criticism, or any other kind of non-aesthetic writing is dis-

guised as fiction, it does not, thereby, necessarily acquire an aesthetic value and it dare not, therefore, be judged as imaginative literature. Hence, if the wide audience, reading *The Source*, learns much that it did not know previously about the Davidic reign, the Talmud, the Middle Ages, modern Palestine, and present day Israel, it does not make this work significant fiction. What **Michener has done, in effect, is to take a number of real situations, disguise them as fiction, and present book clubs with a bestseller.** There is some value here; but it is **surely not art.**

The saddest comment of all, perhaps, is that modern readers of fiction have reached the stage where any sequence of events, if they follow each other rapidly enough, is deemed interesting, and even important. And this may be the result, sad to relate, of our "age of universal toleration" when any action, however monotonous, becomes the great formula for fiction. Such toleration may, in a deeper sense, be the result of our human condition when no one believes anything firmly. And "just as we may be tolerant of other creeds because we believe nothing, so we may tolerate art because we value nothing." Toleration, needless to say, often conceals indifference or lack of real esteem. Hence, *The Source*, liked by many, is, in the true sense, valued by few. Tolerant, we come sadly to terms even with a pseudo-novel.