Brides Who Challenge Death

Brides Who Challenge Death:  
A Jewish Folktale Motif Retold in Different Cultural Contexts

Kristen Lindbeck, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida

Abstract

This paper discusses two stories in which a bride saves her bridegroom, the first by appeal to God, and the second by offering her own life. While previous folklorists have understood the stories as exemplars of the motif of the bridegroom doomed to die, focusing on the role of the bride helps one analyze stories better, revealing that they appear to have originated in different genres. The first closely resembles oral folktales of Jewish women, and therefore modern women’s folklore can shed light on its hero. The second tale, in contrast, has connections to medieval European romance, and a literary reading in light of this genre best explains the bride’s sacrifice.

World folklore and mythology contain a number of stories of a bridegroom who is destined to die on his wedding day. Many of these tales give a prominent role to his bride: she may cause his mortal danger, save him from it, or both. Sometimes the hero is himself fated to die for some reason, as in the Greek Alcestis myth, while sometimes the woman he is marrying is the source of the threat, often because some god or demon covets her. As senior folklore scholar Dan Ben-Amos notes, Jewish stories of this kind are different from stories in other cultures. In them, neither the bridegroom nor the bride dies, and generally the bride saves her bridegroom whether or not she has caused his danger.¹ In a number of medieval Jewish tales, the bride takes an active role in rescuing the bridegroom from the angel of death.

Older treatments of these stories by Jewish folklorists such as Haim Schwarzbaum divide them between those in which the bridegroom is fated to die and those in which he is threatened by a dangerous bride, perhaps because their approach tends to focus on how the Jewish stories are related to international folklore motifs.² In contrast, this paper categorizes these tales by how the bride acts to save her husband, allowing meaningful analyses not possible when they are divided by the nature of the threat to the bridegroom. In particular, it shall be argued that the bride’s role in most of these stories suggests that they derive from oral tales told by women, whereas one story, in which the bride offers to die for her bridegroom, is likely to reflect more androcentric—and more literary—origins.
The wider implications of this article show the value of combining several methodological tools: the older style of comparative folklore studies practiced by scholars such as Schwarzbaum; close reading and literary analysis; and the ethnographic study of women’s folklore from traditional societies. In doing so, one can examine the social significance of folkloric motifs included in written texts, how these motifs developed over time, and how they reflect a combination of oral and literary influences.

This article analyzes a small group of stories that have so many details in common that oral or literary connections among them are probable and in some cases almost certain. The most important of these details are: Their key scenes take place at the wedding celebration; all but one includes advice from Elijah; they show the angel of death first appearing in the guise of a poor man who must be honored, and they conclude with the bride saving her bridegroom. In particular, the focus will be on two stories, for convenience named here after their central themes, “The Bride Who Argued with Death” and “The Sacrificial Bride” (they have no titles in their original contexts). In the first tale, the bride argues with the angel of death to save her bridegroom; this story comes from a late rabbinic or early medieval midrashic text, the Tanhuma, which may date as late as the ninth or tenth century. Versions of this first story appear in both later medieval texts and oral narratives from the twentieth century. In the second story, “The Sacrificial Bride,” dated by many scholars, including this author, to medieval Europe, the bride offers to die in the bridegroom’s place. This second tale, unlike “The Bride Who Argues with Death,” has few if any later parallels.

Scholars have long observed that medieval Jewish tales and legends can be based on both Jewish and non-Jewish sources, and often have roots in oral folklore. Focusing on role of the bride in “The Bride Who Argued with Death” and “The Sacrificial Bride,” helps us observe the complex interplay between Jewish and non-Jewish motifs in these two stories. This analysis in turn reveals that the two narratives, although up until now both have been categorized identically as rabbinic texts with roots in Jewish folklore, are actually best analyzed using somewhat different methodology. As well as discussing the plot of both tales in the context of historically-
oriented Jewish folklore studies, Jewish cultural history, and halakhah, this paper will explore the origin of the specific texts in very different genres. “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” appears to have roots in the folktales of Jewish women, and therefore modern folklore studies as well as close reading can shed light on the role of its heroine. In contrast, “The Sacrificial Bride” has strong connections to medieval European romance, and a literary reading in light of this genre best explains how it presents the bride’s sacrifice. These different approaches to the two stories show how both present the bride as a model or ideal for women, one from a more female-centered perspective, and another from a more androcentric one. It is thus possible to contrast how those different ideals were transmitted or dropped by later Jewish culture.

“The Bride Who Argued with Death,” is in many respects a late rabbinic or early medieval folkloric retelling of the story in Tobit, a book of the Hellenistic Septuagint written before the Common Era and also found in Aramaic fragments at Qumran. The later folktale, however, unlike the story of Tobit and his son Tobias, gives a prominent role to the bride in saving her new husband. This change (as well as some others) almost certainly stems from the story having been retold orally, probably by and for women. Furthermore, the bride, in her bold confrontation with death to save her bridegroom, resembles the heroines of many folktales recorded from twentieth-century Jewish women from traditional societies, embodying the ideal of a woman who is willing to risk herself to rescue her husband so that she can fulfill her role as wife and mother.

“The Sacrificial Bride,” in contrast, in which the bride offers to die in place of the bridegroom, seems to reflect the influence of two different non-Jewish sources. As Ben-Amos states, the theme of the bride’s sacrifice comes from the Greek Alcestis myth or folktales related to it. In this myth, and Euripides’ play of the same name, the young king Admetus is fated to die unless another person dies for him. His parents refuse to do so, but his young bride offers herself in his place. “The Sacrificial Bride,” puts the non-Jewish theme of the bride’s offer to die for her bridegroom in a thoroughly Jewish context. Nevertheless, there are very few later examples of this motif in written texts and none exist in oral sources. This motif is uncommon in Jewish
sources because the notion of a woman dying in her husband’s place was intrinsically alien to pre-modern Jewish culture as well as to Jewish law. The written text’s strongly emotional style, reminiscent of twelfth-century European prose romance, probably appeared later, mostly likely when “The Sacrificial Bride” was written down in a manuscript dating from the twelfth century or somewhat later. This style is in large part replicated in a later work, the Ma’aseh Book, published in 1602, but the latter returns to the resolution of the “The Bride Who Argued with Death.”

**Origins: The Book of Tobit**

Historically speaking, the Jewish origins of “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” are found in the book of Tobit, a very different work that draws from both the Hebrew Bible and international folktale motifs. Here the bridegroom is threatened with death, but the bride, the source of his danger, has no role in saving him. The apocryphal book of Tobit, generally dated to 225-175 BCE, tells of Sarah, the unlucky daughter of Raguel, who is afflicted by the jealous attraction of the demon Asmodeus that has killed her previous seven husbands. She is rescued from Asmodeus by Tobias, Tobit’s son, with the help of an angel who instructs him to drive away the demon by burning the liver and heart of a special fish, allowing the two to marry safely.

As Schwarzbaum states, this scene in the book of Tobit seems to be a literary and religious expansion of a tale type that appears throughout world folklore, usually called “The Grateful Dead.” In stories with this plot motif, the spirit of an abandoned corpse properly buried by the hero comes back as an apparently living man to repay the hero’s good deed by saving him from danger, bringing him great wealth, and often by killing his bride’s monstrous suitor or otherwise rendering a dangerous woman safe to marry. However, the book of Tobit differs from other tales of this type in that the author made several changes to bring it into harmony with ancient Jewish custom and piety. Tobias’s protector is not a dead man, but instead the angel Raphael in disguise. Raphael comes to help Tobias because of his father Tobit’s piety, which included putting himself at risk by burying a dead Israelite even after the previous king had seized all his property and exiled him for providing proper burials for fellow exiles to Babylonia.
whom the king had executed. Sarah too, the deadly bride, is pious; the story begins with her suffering and eloquent prayer to God even before Tobit is introduced and Tobias leaves his father to visit hers. In addition, as Mordechai Friedman writes, it seems likely that the author of Tobit “judaized” the older folktale motif by “adding the motifs of endogamy,” as both a virtue and a commandment, “prayer, and procreation” for, after the demon is driven off, Sarah and Tobias pray, and Tobias affirms that he is marrying Sarah “in truth” rather than for mere sexual satisfaction.7

In one important way, however, this story still contains a typical characteristic of the “Grateful Dead” motif: as usual in this tale type, Sarah is a passive victim of the demon. Even though, unusually, her plight begins the story, she has no part in Tobias’s rescue: he himself defeats the demon with Raphael’s advice. In contrast, in the two later Jewish stories the bride acts decisively to save her bridegroom, even though the first tale has a clear connection to the book of Tobit.

“The Bride Who Argued with Death” in Midrash Tanhuma

This tale, the first of the two Jewish stories on which this paper focuses, appears in the Tanhuma, a late homiletic Midrash. While it cites classical rabbis and may have first appeared as early as 400 CE, it continued to be edited and added to well into the early Middle Ages.8 The context of the story is Deut. 32:10, which says that God protected Israel “like the pupil of his eye.” The story, however, is not directly connected to the verse, nor is it fully incorporated into the Tanhuma’s typical homiletic format. It seems instead as if the midrash’s redactor could not resist the opportunity to share a pious folktale that he thought would inspire his readers. Some of the differences between the book of Tobit and “The Bride Who Argued with Death” bring the latter into line with rabbinic law and religious thought, while others connect it to the realm of a romantic folktale. The story begins by introducing the dilemma of a bride who is a “katlanit,” or “killer wife,” as she is called in rabbinic literature,9 yet who is nevertheless pious and righteous. “She had been married three times” and every time “they found her husband dead” the morning after the wedding. Therefore the young woman says, “‘No one else shall die on my account, I
shall dwell a widow and abandoned woman until the Almighty will see my plight and have mercy.’”

Her father has a brother who lives in another country, so poor that he and his eldest son must work as woodcutters to support the family. “The son’s tears flowed on account of their miseries, and he lifted his eyes to heaven.” Thus, both the young woman and her bridegroom-to-be invoke God’s mercy, a detail perhaps added by the religious focus of the Tanhuma’s redactor. The son then gets permission from his parents to go visit his uncle, and his uncle, aunt, and beautiful cousin make him welcome. Then, at the end of seven days, the young man comes to his uncle with a request. He makes his uncle swear to give him anything he wants, and then asks for his cousin’s hand in marriage. The uncle begins to weep and tries to refuse, but the young man holds him to his oath. His uncle says,

“If you are eager to marry her on account of my successful business, do not wed her, and I will give you plenty of gold and silver, for you are a fine and wise youth, and I advise you not to put yourself in danger.”

The nephew, however, insists, and his uncle becomes “resigned to it.” When he tells his daughter, “she cried out in the bitterness of her soul, and lifted her eyes to heaven,” as her cousin had done before setting out on his journey, saying: “‘Lord of the universe, let your hand strike me, and let them not all die on my account.’” Nevertheless, “what could her father do?” He prepared for the wedding.

At the start of the celebration, the prophet Elijah appears and takes the young man aside, giving him some unusual advice: “When you sit at the feast, there will come to you a poor man dressed in black and torn clothing with his hair matted into spikes—there is no one like this poor man in the world. When you see him, get up from your place and seat him by you and bring him food and drink. Serve him with all your might and honor him.” As the feast itself begins, “that exact poor man” comes. The groom waits on him attentively, and after the feast, the poor man calls the bridegroom aside to another room and says, “My son, I am the messenger of the Almighty, and I have come here to take your soul.” The bridegroom pleads for some more time,
“a year or half a year,” but the angel refuses to grant him even the seven day wedding feast. The angel does, though, grant his last request, to tell his wife goodbye, so long as he returns quickly.

He went to the room where she was sitting alone and crying and praying to her Maker. At the entrance the young man called out to her and she came to open the door for him, and brought him into their private room, embraced him and kissed him. She said, “My brother, why have you come?”

He said to her, “To take leave of you, for my time has come to go the way of all the earth, for the angel has come and told me that he has come to ask for my soul.”

She said, “Do not go—instead, I will go to him and I will speak with him.” She went and found him and said to him, “Are you the angel who has come to take my man’s soul?” . . . . She said, “He will not die now! It is written in the Torah, ‘When a man takes a new wife he shall not go out with the army or be assigned to any duty. He shall be free one year for the sake of his household, to bring happiness to the wife that he has taken’ (Deut. 24:5). And the Holy Blessed One is true, and his Torah is true. And if you take his soul, you will make the Torah a fraud. If you accept my words, it is well, but if not, you shall come with me to the great court on high.”

At once, the Holy Blessed One rebuked the angel, and he left.

The story ends with a striking scene also found in the book of Tobit. The weeping father and mother of the bride get up in the middle of the night to bury their son-in-law privately before dawn. Instead, “they heard the bridegroom and the bride playing and rejoicing together. They entered the room to see what had happened; they saw and rejoiced.”

Schwarzbaum states that “this is nothing else than a folk-retelling of the old, famous tale embedded,” in the book of Tobit although he does not enumerate the resemblances between the stories. To do so briefly: Both begin the emotional anguish of the deadly bride, and in both stories a young man from a poor family goes on a journey to meet his uncle and asks to marry his “very beautiful and pious” cousin, thus reinforcing the value of endogamy. A supernatural helper, in this case Elijah, saves the bridegroom from death. Finally, they both include the same
striking scene: the bride’s parents, getting up late at night to dig a grave, joyfully discover that their son-in-law is alive.

Some of the differences between the “The Bride Who Argued with Death” and the Book of Tobit stem from religious and cultural changes that took place from Second Temple times to late-rabbinic or early-medieval Judaism. The bride has survived three dead husbands, not seven, a change almost certainly due to rabbinic law, which prohibits the remarriage of a woman whose previous husbands have died shortly after the wedding and is ambiguous only on whether this means two or three earlier husbands. Thus, the bride has had the maximum of three rabbinically allowed marriages before the story enters the realm of folktale and the miraculous. The bridegroom’s supernatural helper is now Elijah, rather than Raphael, reflecting the prophet’s role as savior and advisor in rabbinic texts, as well as, if the story is later, Elijah’s common role as supernatural helper in medieval Jewish folklore. The appearance of the angel of death as a poor beggar is also found in the Babylonian Talmud, and whether this motif in “The Bride Who Argued with Death” is derived from the Talmudic tale or another source, its presence in the Bavli may have inspired or legitimated the our tale’s inclusion in a collection of rabbinic midrash. In addition, Friedman observes that the story in the Tanhuma also eliminates what he terms “pagan elements.” In the book of Tobit, a named demon threatens the bridegroom and is driven off by a ritual involving fish innards (details that, if not precisely pagan, are more in keeping with Jewish and non-Jewish magical praxis and folk medicine than rabbinic piety). In contrast, in the Tanhuma, an angel of God (apparently the angel of death) threatens the bridegroom and “his mission is canceled because of an argument based on the verse of the Torah, not as a result of magical exorcism rites.”

“The Bride Who Argued with Death” also has elements common to both Middle Eastern and European folklore, including the poor hero’s occupation of wood cutter, the timelessness of the setting, and the namelessness of all protagonists. The narrative style is characterized by short sentences strung together with “and,” a common attribute both of folktales transcribed from oral sources and of narrative in orally transmitted rabbinic texts such as the Babylonian Talmud.
and may derive from either or both influences. Furthermore, each character’s thoughts and intentions are expressed entirely by dialogue (here including prayer to God), which is generally characteristic of transcribed folklore.17

Another striking difference between the Tanhuma’s version and the book of Tobit, not noted by previous scholars, is the importance of the wedding itself. Whereas Raguel marries daughter his Sarah to Tobias at a private family dinner, the father in this story arranges a wedding feast. This may be in part a reflection of a change in Jewish custom, making a private wedding unthinkable even in unusual circumstances, but the wedding is also key to the plot. Both of the supernatural protagonists attend the wedding: Elijah enters among the respected elders of the city and warns the bridegroom that a poor beggar will appear and should be welcomed and honored. The honor that the bridegroom must show this beggar, the angel of death in disguise, expresses of the theme “charity delivers from death” associated with a wedding in the Talmudic story of Rabbi Akiva’s daughter, as well as in numerous later Jewish folktales.18

In keeping with the emphasis on the wedding, “The Bride Who Argued with Death” includes romantic or gently erotic elements. The bride, instead of rejoicing with her female friends and relatives, sits alone crying and praying, but she clearly waits in the bridal chamber. When the bridegroom arrives, “she came to open the door for him, and brought him into their private room, embraced him and kissed him” (ובאת לפתח לו הבאה לברחוב החוויה ובגשה ל), intimacies that clearly express her new role as a loving wife. Her embrace implies that she imagines at first that they are to consummate the marriage, although she then asks him why he has come. Furthermore, while the book of Tobit emphasizes that the newlywed couple fall chastely asleep, in this version, when the bride’s parents get up to dig a grave, they hear “the bridegroom and the bride playing and rejoicing together,” a phrase that hints at erotic enjoyment. In short, one can easily imagine this story being told at weddings, given how many of its incidents and themes are related to the wedding celebration and the wedding night.

Finally, “The Bride Who Argued with Death” (and all the later versions) differs from Tobit in emphasizing the active role of the bride who challenges death and is victorious. She
plays such a crucial role that it is not strictly accurate to say that the prophet Elijah replaces the book of Tobit’s angel: the bride and the prophet Elijah together fulfill the role of the angel Raphael. The bride is a shrewd protector of her husband, and equal if not superior to him in boldness and faith. Like learned or clever women in some rabbinic narratives and in later Jewish women’s folktales transmitted orally (a number of which are based on this story), she is even willing to call heavenly justice to account. In her willingness to bring the angel of death to the divine court, she also resembles the righteous wife in the oldest existing version of the popular tale “The Seven Good Years,” in an early medieval midrashic work. At the end of the seven years of promised wealth, when the time has come for it to be taken away, the righteous wife fearlessly challenges Elijah, God’s messenger, to find stewards as faithful and generous as she and her husband have been and God responds by giving back her family’s good fortune. Both women expect and demand divine justice, and are rewarded for doing so.

In fact, the Tanhuma’s tale has so many of the elements associated with Jewish women’s folklore that it seems to be based on some story that the author first heard as a boy listening to his female relations. In some parts of the Muslim world, Jewish women’s traditions were remarkably long-lasting, so contemporary studies of folklore and ethnography can help shed light on our story in its original cultural context. Jewish women’s folklore from the Arabic-speaking world, North Africa in particular, is rich in traditions carried forward from medieval times. For example, a Moroccan-Jewish woman in twentieth-century Israel is the source for tale recognizable as a version of “The Bride Who Argued with Death.” This is another dramatic example of how Jewish women have preserved folklore from the past in the Sephardic ballad tradition, passed down from mother to daughter since the exile from Spain in 1492. Here too, the North African, and in particular the Moroccan, versions of the ballads are often closest to their medieval Spanish origins.

Haya Bar-Itzhak and Aliza Shenhar’s ethnographic analysis of Judeo-Arabic folktales collected from elderly Israelis from Morocco tells how the women enjoy telling stories of several genres. They share fairytales, sacred legends, and folktales of clever women to family audiences
including men, women, and children.22 The women’s stories naturally include female characters, and in four fifths of them the protagonist is a woman. In contrast to the men, who tell legends of the public world and of ethnic and religious conflict, “women keep to intra-Jewish subjects and values, especially interfamilial subjects.”23 Taking all this into account, “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” a sacred legend set in the domestic Jewish world, with fairytale motifs and a clever heroine, seems likely to have been created by women story tellers or been recounted often enough by women to be affected by their point of view.

“The Bride Who Argued with Death” also reflects the primary concerns and values expressed by the women’s stories transcribed by Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar. The modern stories reflect the “anxieties and secret wishes of women,” as our tale certainly does too in beginning with the sad fate of a husbandless and childless woman in traditional society. The unnamed bride also demonstrates traits among those that the modern Jewish narrators studied by Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar consider to be a woman’s most important attributes: patience and forbearance, willingness to risk herself for her husband, and both wisdom and cleverness.24

The hypothesis that “The Bride Who Argued with Death” was created or shaped by women narrators is also supported by the characterization of women’s folklore by one of Israel’s founding folklore scholars, Dov Noy. He writes that among traditional Jewish folktales that circulated orally in the twentieth century the clearest distinguishing characteristic of tales told by women is what he calls “the female message.” He describes this message as one that provides lessons relating specifically to women’s desired behavior and duties, but that perhaps also includes an element of “wishful thinking,” of women “seeking . . . to triumph over men.”25 Esther Schely-Newman characterizes this message more fully as one that often valorizes a clever and fearless woman protagonist who is “strong and initiates her own actions” in defense of her husband or children. She acts independently but “her goal nevertheless is to return to her traditional role”26 or, in our case, to enter into her traditional role by keeping her husband alive.

This model reflects the experience of women in traditional societies, where, given adequate resources and family support, the role of a Jewish wife and mother brought with it legal
Brides Who Challenge Death

protection and social honor, for poorer women the knowledge that their hard work was essential, and, at best, the respect and love of her husband and family. In such a world, anything that weakened or threatened a woman’s conventional role was overwhelmingly likely to make her life worse: this included events such as the death of children; the illness, death or disappearance of her husband; extreme poverty; lack of financial support or emotional abuse from in-laws; or arbitrary oppression by Gentile rulers, not to mention natural disasters or war. In Jewish women’s folktales, the heroines overcome many of these threats, and magical obstacles as well, to gain or regain their places as wives and mothers.

As Bar Itzhak and Shenhar note, such “narratives by women . . . reinforce the claim of feminist literature that argues that women internalize the values and norms” of their patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the religious message of “The Bride Who Argued with Death” and the boldness of the young bride remain appealing to this author as a feminist and to the modern people with whom this author have shared the story, from students to friends and fellow academics.

The unnamed woman, deprived of a normal married life by the deaths of her first three husbands, resolves to live unmarried to spare another man from the threat of death, despite her difficult position as a woman without husband or children. Furthermore, although rabbinic law in fact forbade a “killer wife” from marrying a fourth time, the story presents staying single as her own decision. Nevertheless, she is forced to be married again against her will, reflecting women’s lack of self-determination in that culture. Still, this marriage is to someone she could live happily with: her paternal cousin, a good match in Jewish culture of the time, and the socially ideal one in the medieval Arabic-speaking world. Furthermore her bridegroom is a “fine and wise youth,” as her father calls him, and a young man determined to risk the danger of wedding her. He does not seek her father’s fortune and her together, as most poor folktale heroes do. In fact, her father offers him riches without marriage, but he insists on marrying the heroine. She weeps and prays to God with deep faith, but not much hope, until, when all seems lost, she takes matters into her own hands, leaving the bridal chamber to confront God’s deadly
Brides Who Challenge Death

messenger. Rewarding her courage, God accepts and endorses her challenge of the divine decree. In short, the story’s brave, wise, and clever heroine has clear appeal to both a pre-modern Jewish audience, particularly women, and to modern women and men, although in somewhat different ways.

The story could appropriately end with the bride and bridegroom rejoicing together, and as a woman’s folktale perhaps it did so, without the final pious coda of our written version. The scribe who included it in the Tanhuma however, ends with public celebration and prayer. The bride’s parents announce the miracle to the congregation, and “praised the Name.” This liturgical phrase brings the tale into a specifically Jewish context and introduces its religious moral, “and this is how the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves those who trust in him.”

In addition to the rabbinic parallels noted above, “The Bride Who Argued with Death” has biblical antecedents that make it easy to see why it was included in a work of rabbinic Midrash, even if the bride’s active role has origins in Jewish women’s folktales. The theme of a righteous woman’s acting as plaintiff to challenge divine decree goes back to the brotherless daughters of Zelophehad who ask to inherit their father’s future portion in the Land of Israel (Num. 27:1-12). The motif of a wife protecting her husband from supernatural danger also appears in the mysterious episode in Exodus 4:24-26 in which Zipporah preserves Moses by circumcising their son, discussed by Schwarzbaum at some length. He notes that rabbinic sources say that Moses was threatened not by God—although verse 24 reads literally “the LORD met him and sought to kill him”—but by Satan or by the angel of death, like the bridegroom in our story.28

Thus, the Tanhuma’s story takes a common theme of myth and folktale, the deadly bride, and presents a uniquely Jewish version of it. As well as having biblical resonance, “The Bride Who Argued with Death” is aligned with rabbinic tradition, reflecting its concern for justice and also its legal rulings, at least in the more liberal interpretation of the Talmudic law on remarriage of dangerous brides.29 At the same time it also expresses the fears and aspirations of popular Jewish storytellers, women in particular, in presenting a “deadly bride” who is able to save her
Brides Who Challenge Death

bridegroom by her courage, faith, and wisdom. It is easy to understand why the theme that this story originated, that of a bold and pious bride saving her endangered bridegroom, has had so many later retellings, from the sixteenth-century *Ma’aseh Book* to twentieth-century Israel.

**“The Sacrificial Bride” in Moses Gaster’s *Exempla of the Rabbis***

The second story on which this paper focuses, “The Sacrificial Bride” has distinct parallels with the story in the *Tanhuma*, in which the bride argues with death, but also startling differences. Most strikingly, the bridegroom is saved when bride offers to sacrifice her life for him, whereas the bride in our first story challenges the angel of death not to defy the Torah. This tale is first found in the medieval manuscript *Sefer ha-Maasiyot*, a collection of stories including folktales, which was published by Moses Gaster as *Exempla of the Rabbis*. While “The Sacrificial Bride” contains key details that show it is related, and probably derived from, the *Tanhuma*’s story, its overall message and tone are quite different. These differences arise from the influence of the Greek myth of Alcestis, in which a young wife offers to die as a substitute for her husband. The Alcestis plot probably entered Jewish tradition through Byzantine folklore, but this story seems also have been influenced by Western European literary sources, perhaps including Christian authors who drew directly or indirectly from the medieval mythographers who retold classical myths in summary form.

Although Gaster, writing in 1923, dated the original version *Exempla of the Rabbis* to the rabbinic period, William G. Braude, in his prologue to the reprint edition in 1968, informs us that later scholars have universally seen it as a medieval collection. Proposed dates range from the early Islamic period to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. The stories are embedded in the literary framework of a chronicle about ten kings who ruled the world, starting from Nimrod, Joseph, and Solomon and proceeding through Alexander to the Messiah and God in future. This frame, according to Eli Yassif, points to a Christian Western European influence, as most of the Jewish chronological anthologies that mix history, legend, and folktale come out of Western Europe. Christian “European literature of the early Middle Ages was . . . characterized by rich
and developed historiographical writing” that also mixed historical material with stories that today would be called folktales.34

“The Sacrificial Bride” shares its wedding theme with “The Bride Who Argued with Death” and like some stories in which a woman argues for her bridegroom’s life, begins with a hero fated to die on his wedding day rather than one who wants to marry a dangerous bride. The bridegroom’s father, Reuben the Scribe (the only named character), rebukes a poor man who sits in his place in the synagogue: “Do not sit with the important people.” He reduces the man to tears, and, as a result, a heavenly decree goes out to take the life of Reuben’s only son, born to him in his eightieth year. Reuben sees the angel of death and asks his permission to delay his son’s death for thirty days. The angel of death agrees to wait, but is rebuked fourfold (presumably by God) for giving the youth more time.

Reuben decides to divide two thirds of his property between charity and his son’s wedding celebration, and leave one third over, trusting in God’s unexpected mercy. Just before the wedding, Elijah comes and tells the son that he is due to die, but that one thing may save him. The son responds stoically that if his time has come he is willing to submit to God’s will, but Elijah warns him that the angel of death is angry, and his death will be particularly terrible. Frightened, the young man asks Elijah what to do. The prophet replies that if he honors the angel of death, who will appear the next day as a poor man wearing dirty and torn clothing, “perhaps he will have mercy.” In this story, the angel of death will not come to the wedding feast as in “The Bride Who Argued with Death” but to the synagogue, the site of the father’s sin, as his father goes up to read from the Torah with his son standing beside him.

The next day the son does as Elijah says, and greets the poor man, saying, “Get up, Sir, and sit with the important people.”

The poor man, actually the angel of death, replies “My son, lately your father said to me, ‘Do not sit with the important people,’ and you are telling me, ‘Sit.’” The son assures him that he indeed wants honor him, and the angel of death says, “May He to whom honor is due have compassion on you.” Then the angel of death “leaves and goes and sits at the entrance of the
bridal chamber,” bringing the son with him. The angel asks an apparently hypothetical question: If a man borrows straw and then uses that straw to build a house of mud bricks, what should he do when asked for the return of his straw? The son gives the logical answer: give the lender some other straw. But what can he do, the angel asks, if he demands the original straw? The son answers that then the borrower must demolish his house and soak the bricks to separate the straw. The angel of death says, “My son, you are the straw, and the breath of life is the house. The Holy Blessed One, the owner of the straw, has sent me to take back his straw.” This lengthy dialogue also appears in at least one later story.

Just then the father of the lad comes from the synagogue, weeping and mourning. He throws himself down before the angel of death and pleads with him to take his life in place of his son’s life. The angel of death then “clothed himself with the garments of cruelty, wrath and anger,” appearing as a warrior. He “unsheathed his sword and placed his foot upon his neck, in order to slay him.” At that point, the father “trembles in all his limbs,” gets up, and flees, saying, “Take the life of the one whose life you have been sent to take, for I cannot bear your coming to me.” When she sees this, the lad’s old mother in her turn throws herself down before the angel of death and pleads to die in her son’s place, “her hair dragging in the dust,” but she cannot bear the angel’s terrible appearance and his foot on her neck any better than her husband could and runs into the house, shutting the door behind her, and saying the same, “Take the life of the one whose life you have been sent to take . . . ”

Finally, the bride “hears the commotion and comes down from her bridal chamber,” throws herself down before the angel of death, and offers herself in place of her groom. “I ask you that you take my life in place of this lad . . . to fulfill that which is written, ‘a life for a life’” (Lev. 24:18). The angel of death puts on his garments of “cruelty, wrath and anger,” unsheathes his sword, and puts his foot on her neck, and she simply says, “Complete the task of the King of Kings who sent you.” Two, then three times, the angel puts his foot on her neck, but she does not waver. Then the angel of death feels compassion for her and tears of pity fall from his eyes. At last, the Holy Blessed One decides that if the cruel angel of death has mercy on them, then He,
the merciful God, must have mercy as well, and adds seventy years to the lifespan of both the bride and groom. 37

As Schwarzbaum remarks, this story differs from the usual versions of the Alcestis motif, in that when the bridegroom’s family members offer to die in his place, they do not take it for granted that the angel of death will easily accept a substitute. This is in harmony with the very few other Jewish retellings of the Alcestis plot, in which the problem of finding someone to die for the bridegroom is not presented at the start of the story, “because to employ the Psalmist’s graphic utterance . . . ‘no man can by any means ransom his brother, nor pay the Lord the price of that release . . .’ (Ps. 49:8).” 38 Additionally, rabbinic law forbids deliberately sacrificing one’s own life for another just as it forbids killing another person to save one’s life.

One puzzling detail of this story, unremarked on by other interpreters, is the bride’s use of the verse, “A life for a life.” How can her life be equated to that of a murderer who is executed because he has killed? The answer is to be found in the rabbinic dictum that publicly humiliating someone is equivalent to murder. One instance of the principle is, “Anyone who shames his fellow in public, it is as if he spilled blood” (BT Baba Metzia 58b). Because Reuben the Scribe humiliates a poor man, God “visits the guilt of the fathers upon the children” (Ex. 20:5), as God alone may do, although human courts may not, a conclusion sometimes echoed in the Talmud. 39 Thus the bride offers herself as atonement for the guilt of the man who is to be her father-in-law, sacrificing herself for the son on account of his father.

This story has enough clear parallels with “The Bride Who Argued with Death” to show it is essentially the same story with only two significant changes in the basic plot. One of these changes falls at the beginning and one toward the end, which, as Dov Noy notes, is typical of a story changed to fit a new context. 40 The stories share the theme of the wedding, the warning from Elijah that the angel of death will appear as a poor man who must be honored, the scene in which the angel of death takes the bridegroom aside tell him he is about to die, and, lastly, the courage of the bride and God’s decision to spare the bridegroom as a result of her action.
“The Sacrificial Bride” in the *Exempla of the Rabbis* also may have been influenced by variations on “The Bride Who Argued with Death” in which the groom is fated to die for reasons related to himself or his family, not because the bride is dangerous. The earliest known example of this version appears in an early medieval work, the *Midrash ‘Aseret ha-Dibberot* (*Midrash on the Ten Commandments*). In this story, all the bridegroom’s father’s other sons have died, and his father prays to have a son who will live to his wedding. The resolution in the Midrash on the Ten Commandments is essentially the same as in the *Tanhuma*: The bride saves the bridegroom by appealing to God with the biblical verse stating that a newly married man does not go to war. The bride’s argument is subtly different here, however, as she pleads more explicitly for herself than the bridegroom, asking that she at least be able to conceive a child from the marriage. She prevails because she has kept the commandment of honoring her father and mother by helping her old mother draw water for schoolchildren. This ties the story to the Ten Commandments—and although the connection seems rather forced, this is also the case for many other stories in the collection.

Clearly, despite its points of contact with both these versions of “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” the resolution of “The Sacrificial Bride” is strikingly different. The bride offers her own life, rather than arguing or pleading for justice. A more detailed comparison between “The Sacrificial Bride” and the “Bride Who Argued with Death” reveals other differences. First of all, continuing this essay’s focus on the bride, one notes that the bride in Gaster’s *Exempla* is a cipher, or at least a mystery. She does not appear until the end of the story when she shows her brave determination to die in her bridegroom’s place. In contrast, something of the character of the bride in both medieval versions of the “Bride Who Argued with Death” is revealed. In the *Tanhuma*, the young woman is described at the beginning of the story, as she resolves to live alone rather than put another man at risk. Later, she prays that God may strike her down rather than endanger others, and she fearlessly advocates for her bridegroom, threatening to bring the angel of death before “the great court” on high. In the *Midrash on the Ten Commandments*, the bride appears only at the end. When the angel of death appears, she asks God to spare her
bridegroom so she can have children, and God hears her plea because of her service to her mother in doing good deeds. Both of these stories share the characteristics of women’s folklore as defined above. Their points of contact include the domestic setting, the way they foreground the plight of the soon-to-be widowed brides, and their heroines’ character as ideal women in traditional Jewish society: not only pious and virtuous, but also wise and clever in seeking to fulfill their traditional role as wife and mother. The heroine of the “The Sacrificial Bride,” however, has no previous history nor any stated motivation for her great courage.

Nor is she a role model for women in an elite scholarly Jewish context, even a medieval one. Jewish Crusade chronicles praise women who died for the Sanctification of the Name: who let themselves be killed rather converting to Christianity or committed suicide to avoid murder, rape, or forced conversion. Willingness to die for God, however, was not equated to willingness to die for another person. In medieval times, in fact, the Talmudic principle that all human life has equal value was held to mean that it is wrong to put one’s own life at serious risk to save someone else. It follows from this principle, expressed in rabbinic responsa, that a woman should not sacrifice her life or trade her life for another’s. While some later, orally transmitted, Jewish folktales that go against this legal principle, they far more often present women willing to die for their children rather than their husbands. Thus, the resolution of the “The Sacrificial Bride” stands in opposition to both rabbinic legal sources and the majority of later orally transmitted Jewish tales.

One sees an interesting indication of how foreign “The Sacrificial Bride” was to literate Jewish culture in a story found in the Yiddish Ma’aseh Book, called there “The Bride Who Saved Her Husband from Death and Obtained a Reprieve of Seven Years.” The Ma’aseh Book is a collection of pious legends and a few folktales, most derived from rabbinic texts but some dating from medieval Europe, first published in 1602. Its version of our tale draws from the “The Sacrificial Bride” in many details, but not in its resolution, returning instead to the well-known conclusion of “The Bride Who Argued with Death.” The tale begins with “R. Reuben,” who shares a name with “R. Reuben the Scribe” in “The Sacrificial Bride” of The Exempla of the
Brides Who Challenge Death

Rabbis and who, like him, has only one son. Although the father commits no particular sin, “The Bride Who Saved Her Husband from Death” has most of the same episodes in the same order as “The Sacrificial Bride.” The angel of death appears and tells Reuben that his son is due to die immediately, but grants him a reprieve to plan the son’s wedding. Both narratives contain Elijah’s advice to the son to honor the angel of death who will appear as a poor man and, most strikingly, both include the angel’s lengthy allegory of the straw and the bricks. However, instead of anyone offering to die for the bridegroom, the angel of death grants him permission to take leave of his parents and his new bride. The parents weep, his father prays, and the bride argues with death exactly as in the Tanhuma. 46 Weakening the power of the bride’s claim for justice, however, is the theme of pity also emphasized in the conclusion of “The Sacrificial Bride.” After the bride presents her case, “the angel of death . . . felt pity for them, and went before the Lord and begged for his life, and other angels joined in prayer . . . . The Lord took pity on him and prolonged his life” 47

This story in The Ma’aseh Book, where even the father’s name is the same as in “The Sacrificial Bride,” is reasonably certain to derive from that story, probably even from the version in the manuscript published by Gaster as The Exempla of the Rabbis. The likely history of the story is that at some point the theme of the bride sacrificing herself to save her husband entered Jewish folklore from some folkta le based on the Alcestis myth, was expanded and adapted to Jewish culture in The Exempla of the Rabbis, and then rejected by some scribe or storyteller, perhaps the compiler of The Ma’aseh Book himself, Jacob ben Abraham of Mezeritch. This re-teller, whoever he was, retained the bridegroom doomed to die, his father’s name, and even the lengthy allegory of the bricks and straw from “The Sacrificial Bride,” but substituted the resolution of the earlier “Bride Who Argued with Death.” The motif of the bride offering to die for the bridegroom was dropped either because it contradicted official Jewish ethical teaching, because it seemed unrealistic or disturbing, or all three.

The Alcestis Myth and Other Sources for “The Sacrificial Bride”
One can also analyze “The Sacrificial Bride,” by studying its probable origins and influences, and here too, the role of women in the story is key to understanding both. The Alcestis myth is essentially one of a woman sacrificing herself for her bridegroom and his family, a motif that has essentially been absent from Jewish folklore, especially Jewish women’s folklore, but popular in other Eastern Mediterranean traditions as well as in Medieval Western European sources. In addition, the literary style of “The Sacrificial Bride” includes a particular view of women, one found in Medieval European prose romance.

There is a consensus that “The Sacrificial Bride” derives its conclusion derives from the Alcestis myth, although one cannot know precisely how Alcestis entered Jewish narrative. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, two possible pathways of influence exist. The more likely path is through Byzantine folklore, although the version in The Exempla of the Rabbis may also have been influenced by Western European sources that drew directly or indirectly from medieval mythography, as will be demonstrated after reviewing the Alcestis motif and describing its medieval derivatives.

Scholars of folklore hold that the theme of a man fated to die and his bride or young wife agreeing to die in his place has its earliest known exemplar in the Greek Alcestis myth, whose most elaborate and famous classical source is Euripides’ play of the same name. Experts agree, however, that there is an Eastern Mediterranean folktale that underlies Euripides’ work, and that this orally transmitted story resembles “The Sacrificial Bride” as much as it does the Greek play. L. P. E. Parker describes the most common folktale plot:

Essentially, a young man is suddenly threatened with death on his wedding day, with the proviso that he can be saved if someone else will willingly give his or her life, or part of it, to save him. His parents refuse; only his bride accepts. She does not, however, die at once. Either she gives only half of her remaining years, or, if she simply agrees to die, the divine powers are moved to pity and spare both her and the bridegroom. So the marriage takes place and the future of the [patriarchal] family is secured.
The differences between the Alcestis story and “The Sacrificial Bride” have already been noted. Nevertheless, the fundamental link between “The Sacrificial Bride” and the Alcestis folktale plot remains clear: both have a bridegroom fated to die and juxtapose his parents’ unwillingness to die in their son’s place with his bride’s willingness to do so.

Taking all the evidence into account, Gaster’s theory that the historical link between the Alcestis and “The Sacrificial Bride” comes through Greek or Byzantine folklore remains likely. Indeed the essential outlines of the story—the parents’ refusal to sacrifice themselves for their son, while his wife consents—are also found in a late medieval Turkish epic, the *Book of Dede Korkut*, as well as in the more recent folklore summarized by Graham Anderson. Furthermore, the Western European literary retellings that provide Alcestis’s name to writers such as Boccaccio and Chaucer generally eliminate the young husband’s parents from the story. Thus the basic plot of “The Sacrificial Bride” probably passed into Jewish folklore from Byzantine sources in which the parents were present. Then, once it entered Jewish folklore, the two strongly non-Jewish plot elements were modified. Instead of the bridegroom deliberately asking another person to die for him, the parents and the bride spontaneously and emotionally plead to let their lives be taken instead; and instead of parents selfishly refuse to sacrifice themselves for their son, elderly parents want to die for him but then refuse because of their fear of the angel’s terrifying manifestation. Nevertheless, one strikingly non-Jewish element remains: the young bride’s insistence on dying for her new husband.

One more question remains: If folklore of the Eastern Mediterranean or Middle East provides the plot of “The Sacrificial Bride,” what is the provenance of the specific version that is present in *The Exempla of the Rabbis*? There are two sets of reasons to conclude that it comes from a middle to late medieval Western European source. Some reasons concern the manuscript itself; others concern the way it tells the story of “The Sacrificial Bride.”

In the manuscript, the story is among many embedded in the framework of a historical chronicle, an organizing principle much more common in Western Europe than in the Arabic-speaking world, as noted above. Also, one particular narrative in the collection points to a
Western European origin: it contains a story “about the annual sacrifice of a Jewish child by a Christian wherein the common European motif is reversed.”\textsuperscript{54} It is hard to imagine such a story arising except in reaction to the toxic fantasies of blood libel, which originated in eleventh-century Christian Western Europe.

The literary style of the version of “The Sacrificial Bride” in \textit{The Exempla of the Rabbis} also suggests a European origin. While earlier it has been showed how the self-sacrifice of the bride in the folktale is not theologically or legally analogous to the martyrdom of Jewish women during the Crusades, it does resonate stylistically and emotionally with the Jewish Crusade chronicles in their descriptions of female bravery. As Avraham Grossman writes in his book on Jewish women in the Middle Ages, “There is no other genre in the medieval Jewish world in which women occupy such an important place and are portrayed in such a sympathetic and admiring manner” as the Crusade chronicles.\textsuperscript{55}

The chronicles also dramatize and in a sense romanticize women’s sacrifice and suffering. One of the most pitiful and disturbing episodes is that of “Mistress Rachel” recounted in the Chronicle of Solomon bar Samson. She resolves to kill her four children before they can be kidnapped and converted by the Crusaders. Nevertheless, dread of the task almost overwhelms her: When Rachel “saw the knife [that she planned to use to kill her children] she burst into wild and bitter sobbing, and she struck her face and breast, saying, ‘O Lord, where is your steadfast love.’” She steels herself, allows the neighbor to kill one of her little sons, herself kills her daughters, and finally drags her last son from under the furniture and kills him too. Then she remains “sitting and lamenting” over her dead children, covering them with the wide sleeves of her gown, until she herself is beaten to death by the crusaders. In contrast to her sons, her young daughters, like the heroine of the “The Sacrificial Bride,” are old enough to understand and consent to the sacrifice: “She still had two daughters, Bella and Madrona, stately and beautiful virgins . . . and the girls took the knife and sharpened it, so it would have no blemish” that would render the slaughter invalid.\textsuperscript{56}
In “The Sacrificial Bride,” emotional parallels exist in the fearlessness of the young bride who tells the angel, “‘Complete the task of the King of Kings who sent you,’” three times, before the angel of death himself begins to weep, and God too has mercy. One can even see our narrative as redeeming—or in some sense contradicting—the somber message of the Chronicles. In contrast to the divine silence that marks the murders and suicides in the Jewish communities of the Rhineland, in our tale even the angel of death weeps to see the innocent young bride’s self-sacrifice, and God has mercy and spares her life and that of her bridegroom.

Yet, it is unnecessary to insist on a connection to the deadly serious Crusade Chronicles when analyzing the literary techniques of our more folklore story, “The Sacrificial Bride.” What Gaster himself calls the “fine romantic touch” of the bride’s self-sacrifice (which he finds remarkable, given his early dating for the manuscript), may have an additional or alternate source: it may be taken directly from the European prose romances which inspired the Chronicles’ emotionally wrenching depictions of the human drama of child sacrifice and martyrdom. Susan Einbinder details the stylistic connection between the prose of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and the European vernacular prose romances of the twelfth century. She writes that early romances, like the contemporaneous Chronicles, are characterized by:

- an attention to detail . . . to shifting points of view and individual motive, to inner conflict and self awareness, to private desire over against public demands, and love as a source of ennoblement or degradation . . . [and by] the new literary visibility of women

Other characteristics which the Hebrew prose chronicles share with the vernacular romances are “narrative techniques . . . that express inner conflict and doubt.” Furthermore, like both the Crusade Chronicles and “The Sacrificial Bride,” the prose romances create “pathos through images of women and children.”

“The Sacrificial Bride” begins by expressing shifting points of view and a certain sense of its characters’ self awareness. First, the poor man is offended by Reuben the Scribe, the bridegroom’s father, weeping and praying to God for justice, followed by Reuben himself, appalled to learn that the angel of death is coming for his son and not for him. Then a brief
description of Reuben’s response and his reasons for it is discussed. He divides his property in thirds, “one part for the poor and needy, one part” for his son’s wedding feast, saying to himself, “Perhaps the verse will be fulfilled, ‘Wealth is no use on the day of wrath, but charity saves from death’” (Proverbs 11:4), “and one part he left aside to see how it would be.” While scarcely novelistic, this glimpse into Reuben’s motivation moves beyond the usual style of transcribed folktales, which convey people’s thoughts strictly by dialogue and actions. The parallel scene in the plot of “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” illustrates the difference: “What could her father do? He betrothed her and made a wedding feast and invited the elders of the city and prepared a canopy.” The earlier folktale expresses none of the father’s thoughts or feelings, only describes what he did.

Furthermore, the “inner conflict and doubt” are described by Einbinder repeatedly in “The Sacrificial Bride.” The son is at first piously resigned to his death—“from the time the Holy Blessed One created the world, everyone whose day has come dies”—but changes his mind when Elijah tells him that the angel of death will come to him in terrible form and asks the prophet for help. Most obviously, doubt and inner conflict is revealed in the bridegroom’s father and mother: At first determined to die for their son, each one fails to withstand the terror of death’s unsheathed sword and flees.

“The Sacrificial Bride story also clearly creates “pathos through images of women and children.” This technique is described in the pitiful detail of the old mother’s hair coming uncovered and dragging in the dust when she throws herself at the feet of the angel of death, and even more in the interaction between the angel of death and the bride. When the angel prepares to kill he reveals his awesome, wrathful aspect, but nevertheless ends up shedding tears of pity at the self-sacrifice of the innocent young bride, inspiring God to pity in His turn. Here indeed, the drama and pathos of a literary prose romance, particularly in comparison to the simple folktale style of “The Bride Who Argued with Death” are prominent. In the latter, the angel simply insists repeatedly that the bridegroom’s time has come; on being implored to wait he says only, “I will allow you that, but you must come back quickly,” and at the end he silently disappears.
when rebuked by God. The bride who argues with death is grief-stricken but not dramatically pathetic, and her bravery in confronting the angel is implied rather than described.

One more subtle detail makes this Jewish version of “The Sacrificial Bride” seem more Western European to me: the public setting of the confrontation with the angel of death. Father, mother, and bride in turn throw themselves down and plead before the angel of death in a courtyard or street outside the house where the wedding takes place. In contrast, both early medieval versions of “The Bride Who Argued with Death” imply that the bride’s bold confrontation with the angel of death takes place in a private room, in keeping with Middle Eastern norms of female modesty.

Lastly, the Alcestis myth was certainly known in Western Europe, and the theme of a bride or wife sacrificing herself for her husband appealed to a number of non-Jewish writers of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, including Chaucer. In short, “The Sacrificial Bride” fits well into European Jewish culture of the twelfth to fourteenth century. One can easily imagine “The Sacrificial Bride” being read by a medieval Jewish man for pleasure and edification, translated out loud into the vernacular for a family group, or even being used as a sermon illustration.

Considering the story as a whole, Schwarzbaum as well as Gaster find the “The Sacrificial Bride” particularly dramatic and moving. It is impressive how the story takes the basic plot structure from Alcestis and makes it so thoroughly Jewish: bringing in the rabbinic motif of public humiliation being ethically equivalent to bloodshed; introducing the loving parents’ desire to sacrifice themselves; and elaborating on the fearful characteristics of the angel of death found in the Talmud. Although the story contradicts the legal ruling that one should not risk one’s life for another person, it nevertheless shows familiarity with rabbinic and probably medieval Jewish literary sources. Overall, “The Sacrificial Bride” has such deep connection to Judaism and such creativity and drama (or melodrama) that one must ask why it did not exert a greater influence on later Jewish folktales, written and oral.
Two reasons are suggested above. First, educated writers familiar with the rabbinic legal tradition would have rejected the idea of the bride’s offering to sacrifice herself for her husband. This response probably created the somewhat unsatisfying version in the Ma’aseh Book, which reproduces most of “The Sacrificial Bride” except for its resolution, where it goes back to the model of “The Bride Who Argued with Death.” Second, it is argued here that oral folklore has generally neglected “The Sacrificial Bride” because of its limited appeal to women storytellers when compared to “The Bride Who Argued with Death.” The bride’s motivation goes undescribed, and her offer to die in her bridegroom’s place, rather trying to make the marriage possible, would not have attracted them. Another factor that might have made storytellers shy away from “The Sacrificial Bride” is that in pre-modern times virtually all Jewish women were married off by their parents by the time they were thirteen or even younger, and a young girl’s willingness to sacrifice herself for someone whom she may have barely met may simply not have seemed plausible to either women or men. Thus the themes from Alcestis, even when adapted to Jewish culture, would have posed legal problems for rabbincially learned male scribes and lacked emotional resonance for oral storytellers, women in particular.

**Conclusion**

Medieval Jewish folktales arose from the interaction among orally transmitted stories and written texts as well as among Jewish and non-Jewish sources. The literary and historical relationship between the “The Bride Who Argued with Death” and “The Sacrificial Bride” provides a fine example of the complex interplay between literary and orally-transmitted sources and between non-Jewish and Jewish sources. In every version of these stories, the bride provides the key to understanding the meaning of each story and its probable origins in place and time, and furthermore allows us to see how each story expresses an ideal for women within a particular social context.

Beginning with the book of Tobit, a religious literary work is based on a common folklore theme, “The Grateful Dead.” Generally, in such stories the bride has no particular personality, but is desired for her beauty and often for her father’s wealth and power. Perhaps to
emphasize the role of wife as helpmeet in the Jewish family (as well to provide narrative tension) the suffering of Sarah, the deadly but pious bride, introduces the story. Furthermore, the author of Tobit elaborates on the simple plot of the original folktale to make Sarah’s rescue and her safe marriage to Tobias intimately bound up with God’s providential healing of Tobias’ father Tobit from blindness and rescue of his family from poverty and oppression. Sarah is an important character in the story, both pious and worthy of pity, but she passive in both her suffering and her rescue. In as far as she represents an ideal of feminine conduct, it is essentially to pray and trust in God and one’s menfolk for rescue. The vision of women here shares the Second Temple Hellenistic-influenced ethos of The Wisdom of Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), another Septuagint text with a Hebrew original that was not canonized by Judaism but did influence later rabbinic literature. Ben Sirach knows the value of a good wife, saying, for example, that “A loyal wife brings joy to her husband,” and “A silent wife is a gift from the Lord” (26:2, 14 NRSV). For Ben Sirach, however, as in the book of Tobit, women as wives only support their husbands rather than help them significantly, in contrast to the earlier “Woman of Valor” in Proverbs who benefits her husband with her wisdom and business acumen (31:10-31).

“The Bride Who Argued with Death,” in the Tanhuma, presents a very different picture of the deadly bride, giving her a necessary role in saving her new husband. It appears to be a retelling of a folktale, although it probably sharpens its religious message by emphasizing the prayers of the protagonists and including a verbatim quotation of the biblical verse that the bride uses in her argument, as well as adding a brief conclusion in which the congregation praises God together. Overall, however, the story retains the directness and simplicity of a folktale, and it bears the hallmarks of Jewish woman’s folklore as characterized by modern folklorists and ethnographers. The bride exemplifies the ideal woman of such stories: brave and clever in defense of her husband or family, and happy to enter into or return to her traditional role.

“The Sacrificial Bride” draws from either the Tanhuma’s story or a similar oral or literary source and in addition, it seems, from a folktale (Jewish or non-Jewish) based on the Greek and Middle Eastern Alcestis myth. It is also a more literary work, probably written in Western
Europe, as shown by the manuscript in which it appears. In literary style, “The Sacrificial Bride” has a distinct resonance with the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and also with the European vernacular prose romances, which influenced the Hebrew Chronicles themselves. The original folktale, in which a bride dies for her husband is more a man’s than a woman’s tale and stems from a pre-Christian patriarchal social context. As Parker states, the resolution of the classic tale ensures that “the future of the [patriline] family is secured.” Nonetheless, the ideal of sacrifice might prove attractive to women as well, especially in cultures such as that of medieval Judaism (and medieval Christianity), which exalted and romanticized religious martyrdom. Still, both oral Jewish folklore and the written re-telling of “The Sacrificial Bride” from the 1602 Ma’aseh Book rejected its resolution. All later oral stories return to the Tanhuma’s resolution, in which the bride confronts the threat to her new husband with an appeal to God. She often makes an argument from scripture that is sometimes accompanied by or replaced with a plea for God’s mercy. The ideal of a woman being willing to die in her husband’s place proved intrinsically alien to pre-modern Jewish culture, both legally and culturally.

Summing up the wider implications of this article, a combination of methodological tools—the older style of comparative folklore studies practiced by Schwarzbaum, close reading, literary analysis such as that of Einbinder, and the ethnographic study of contemporary women’s folklore by Schely-Newman, and Bar-Itzhak and Shenhar—allows the reader to examine the social significance of folkloric motifs and how they developed over time. In addition, scholars have often observed that pre-modern Jewish folklore is characterized by the complex interaction of oral and literary sources. This article’s approach, particularly its use of twentieth century folklore from traditional societies, allows one make that general observation specific, and therefore meaningful. By attending to the cultural and gendered context of stories and the situations in which they were likely to have been read or told, themes adapted from both ancient Jewish and non-Jewish sources were modified according to the values and aesthetics of both the literate elite and of popular storytellers, particularly women.
Insight into the specific characteristics of Jewish “women’s tales” collected orally in the recent past can be applied to stories embedded in medieval midrashic and other literary works, thus providing an echo of women’s voices otherwise lost. Finally, finding stories that seem to be women’s oral tales in early medieval rabbinic sources suggests that even literate male culture of this time respected women’s roles as tradents of religious legends.

2. Haim Schwarzbaum, “The Hero Predestined to Die on His Wedding Day,” in *Studies in Marriage Customs*, ed. Issachar Ben Ami and Dov Noy, Folklore Research Center Studies, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), 223-52. Like Ben-Amos, Schwarzbaum classifies the stories by international and Jewish tale type, a necessary starting point for examining their connection to stories originating in other times and cultures, but one which can obscure the details of a particular narrative.
3. Raphael Patai, for example, writes how “Jewish folklore is characterized . . . by a continuous process of lifting out considerable bodies of folklore from the stream of oral tradition and freezing them in written form,” from which they may later re-enter oral transmission, and how Jewish folklore often incorporates non-Jewish elements whose foreign origin is rapidly forgotten, *On Jewish Folklore* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983) 38, 43.
12. Ibid.
14. BT Mo’ed Katan, 28b, where the angel of death appears before R. Hiyya because the latter’s exemplary virtue and constant Torah study warded off the angel, who was compelled to beg for the rabbi’s soul since he could not seize it by force. See a discussion of this story in Eliezer Diamond, “Wrestling the Angel of Death: Form
Brides Who Challenge Death

15. Friedman, 45-46.
18. BT Shabbat 156b; see also Schwarzbaum, “The Hero Predestined to Die,” 236-37.
20. Barbara Rush, ed. and comp, The Book of Jewish Women’s Tales (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994), 142–45. In this story, which Rush explicitly places in the tradition starting with the Tanūma’s “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” the pious and learned bride does not argue with death but instead appeals directly to heaven and is told by a heavenly voice how to protect her new husband.
21. In contrast, the ballads of the Sephardic communities in the Eastern Mediterranean, such as those of Salonika, had more cultural exchange with their non-Jewish neighbors, see Patricia E. Grieve, Floire and Blancheflor and the European Romance (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195.
23. Ibid., 21.
27. Bar Itzhak and Shenhari, 22.
29. Friedman, 51.
31. Barbara Rush, ed. and comp, The Book of Jewish Women’s Tales, “The Fate of a Son,” told by an Israeli woman from Morocco. In this version, the son is doomed to die on his wedding day, and his bride is a learned girl who studies the Torah all day. She complains directly to God when her bridegroom is doomed to die, “I studied Torah and thought only of you. So now I ask you, are you going to do this to me?” 142–45. For a poetic translation and retelling of the version in the Ma’aseh Book, and references to other versions of “The Bride Who Argued with Death,” some in written in nineteenth and twentieth century Hebrew folklore collections and others from Kurdistan and Morocco (the latter perhaps the one re-told by Rush) transcribed in the Israel Folklore Archives, see Hava Ben-Zvi, The Bride Who Argued With God: Tales from the Treasury of Jewish Folklore (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2006), 3-8.
35. I here translate “huppah” as “bridal chamber” rather than “wedding canopy” because that was one of its meanings in Rabbinic Hebrew and because it makes more sense of the story. The angel of death and the bridegroom sit “at the entrance of the huppah,” but the bride does not hear their conversation. Only later, does she hear and “come down from her huppah.” See Abraham P. Bloch, The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies (New York: KTAV, 1980), 32. In “Fairy Tales from Inedited Hebrew Mss. of the Ninth and Twelfth Centuries,” Folklore: Transactions of the Folk-lore Society 7, no. 3 (September 1896): 241, Google Books, Moses Gaster translates the phrase, “sat by the door of the canopy,” which seems to imply the “canopy” was more like a room.

36. For the angel of death’s dreadful appearance see BT Avodah Zarah 20b which in turn builds on older Jewish tradition found in The Testament of Abraham, 17.

37. Gaster, The Exempla of the Rabbis, 98–99. The translated sections are informed by Moses Gaster’s translation in “Fairy Tales from Inedited Hebrew Mss. of the Ninth and Twelfth Centuries.” Another translation can be found in Howard Schwartz, Gabriel’s Palace: Jewish Mystical Tales (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 162-64, with notes on 319-20. Although Schwartz states the tale is from fourteenth-century Yemen, his source is Gaster’s Exempla of the Rabbis, which most scholars place somewhat earlier, and not in Yemen.


39. Young children die because of the sins of their parents, and righteous people or their children are taken because of the sins of their generation, e.g. BT Ketubot 8b, BT Shabbat 33a.

40. Schely-Newman 165.

41. For a brief description of this work, see Yassif, “The Hebrew Narrative Anthology,” 154, and Strack and Stemberger, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, 368. Both agree that this collection, to quote Strack, “is not a midrash proper, but a collection of Jewish and other stories, often only loosely connected to the Ten Commandments.” Yassif holds that its midrashic framework indicates a “transitional stage” between midrashic and anthology format, suggesting that it is one of the earliest Hebrew narrative anthologies.

42. The detail of the girl’s support for her mother may indicate that this story has its roots in women’s folktales as a girl or woman’s devotion to her mother is a trait praised in contemporary Jewish women’s tales of Moroccan origin, see Bar Itzhak and Shenhar, 22.

43. A more-or-less forced connection between a commandment and the story illustrating it is also found with many other stories in the collection. Schwarzbaum, “The Hero Predestined to Die,” 240; Bin Gorion, Mimekor Yisrael, vol. 3, 1076, based on the version found in Adolf Jellinek’s Bet Ha-Midrash.

44. In fact, the consensus of medieval Jewish legal responsa is that one is forbidden to endanger oneself at all in order to save someone else. See Joseph P. Schultz, Judaism and the Gentile Faiths: Comparative Studies in Religion (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 342.


47. Ibid., 441.


51. Anderson, Fairytale in the Ancient World, 116-17. Furthermore, the Western European folktales and ballads that may be based on the Alcestis theme are more tenuously related to the original folktale than those from the Eastern Mediterranean: the parents are often missing, for example, and frequently a man saves his intended bride, rather than vice versa; see A.H. Krappe, “The Maid Freed from the Gallows,” Speculum 16.2 (1941): 238-40.

52. Parker, 3-4, and note 12.

Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Spring 2013 Volume 10 Number 2
ISSN 1209-9392
© 2013 Women in Judaism, Inc.
All material in the journal is subject to copyright; copyright is held by the journal except where otherwise indicated. There is to be no reproduction or distribution of contents by any means without prior permission. Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors.
Brides Who Challenge Death

56 Jeremy Cohen, Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 108. Cohen continues with a full discussion of Rachel’s story, including a fascinating possible relationship to Christian imagery, especially “Rachel weeping for her children” after Herod’s slaughter of the innocent boy children of Bethlehem, 124-129. Like Cohen, Grossman (201) sees the image of women in the chronicles as a literary construction on a historical base. He also suggests another possible connection between Jewish women in the Crusade chronicles and Christian imagery, the portrayal of women saints and martyrs in the romantic hagiographies of the twelfth century (200, and note 5 on 301).
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Parker, 4-5.
62. Both Mordecai Margulies and Chanoch Albeck hold that the work which contains it, the Exempla of the Rabbis, copies from Midrash ha-Gadol, which was completed in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, see Braude, “Prolegomenon,” xxvi.
64. Grossman, Pious and Rebellious, 33-35. In the first few pages of his chapter on age of marriage Grossman reviews the literature on the subject, stating that while some scholars hold that girls were generally married off during or shortly after their twelfth year, he himself holds that in many medieval Jewish communities a considerable percentage were married even earlier.
65. It is quoted e.g. in BT Hagigah 13a as “The Book of Ben Sira.”
67. Raphael Patai, On Jewish Folklore 38, 43.

Works Cited


Brides Who Challenge Death


*Midrash Tanhuma*. Hebrew: [http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/tan/b0.htm](http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/tan/b0.htm)


English translations in Google Books: [http://www.google.ca/-q=midrash+tanchuma+english+online&tbm=bks](http://www.google.ca/-q=midrash+tanchuma+english+online&tbm=bks)


