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About the Particular and the General**

**Heddy Jason**

**April 1968**

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Rand Corporation  
Santa Monica, California

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THE JEW AND THE BARBER:  
About the Particular and the General\*

Heddy Jason\*\*

The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California

The way of the Jewish people throughout the dark Middle Ages was not an easy one. A defenseless minority at the mercy of the mighty ones, they were more than once persecuted, be it in Christian Europe or under Muslim rule. If the persecution was not acute, a state of inter-ethnic tension prevailed anyway. Such situations could not but find some response in the oral literature of the people. A review of this literature shows indeed a rather great concern with the problem of inter-ethnic tensions. If the situation of the Jew in the Middle Ages was in some respects a unique one, the question may be raised whether the respective folk tales are not unique also, at least in some respects.

The issue of national peculiarity in oral literature has been already raised in another place with respect to the so-called "Jewish" joke (Jason 1967). Here we will discuss the issue and deal with a product of the medieval traditional culture, the sacred tale.

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\* David G. Hays of The RAND Corporation had the kindness to discuss with me the analyses of the tales for which I am greatly indebted to him; the faults are, of course, mine alone.

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The author, a National Sciences Foundation Fellow in Computational Linguistics at The RAND Corporation, prepared this paper for the Annual California Folklore Society Meeting, Berkeley, California, April 12-13, 1968.

Among our sacred tales are many which duplicate universal stories about holy men and their miracles, wonderful help for the virtuous needy, punishment of the wicked, etc. These tales are judaized by exchanging the realia so as to fit the Jewish folk culture and its values. In addition, there is a group of tales with an explicit national theme: the hero is not an individual but a Jewish community. This community is representative of Jews on the whole, and is opposed to the Gentile world. The situation depicted in the plot of these tales and the realia is to a surprising degree near historical reality. The first known text of such a tale is the biblical Book of Esther; the second is the apocryphal so-called Third Book of Maccabeans. Many texts of this kind are found in the medieval homiletic literature and in the 19th century Hassidic chap-books; both are very popular. There seems to be little reason to doubt that the tales went to and fro between the aural and visual media. Tales of this kind are reportedly told when only Jewish audiences are present. While the former group of tales obviously did not originate on the Jewish street but was only superficially judaized, the latter group of tales is more peculiar, and the natural question to ask is: is this group of tales an original product of the Jewish people?

Four circumstances support the supposition that the origin of this kind of tale is exclusively Jewish: the tales deal with Jewish national problems; they are told before exclusively Jewish audiences; there exists a long written tradition of such tales in exclusively Jewish homiletic literature; such tales are, to our knowledge, not found in any other culture.

If the tales should prove to be an exclusive Jewish product, we will have put our finger on a rather exceptional case of a national tale, which, as all exceptions do, can grant us a deeper glimpse into the workshop of its kind



of phenomena, here the folktale. And if the tales should prove not to be exceptional, we will try to learn our lesson from that too.

Let us start with a description of the kind of tale we have in mind:

A Gentile ruler imposes a task on the local Jewish community. This task may be realistic (e.g., to pay an extraordinary monetary contribution—practiced widely in the Ottoman Empire—or to answer tricky questions), or the task may be completely fantastical (e.g., to explain why cooked fishes laughed at the queen, to bring Moses before the king, or to show the validity of some biblical verse, which implies working a miracle). The task has to be accomplished under the pain of death for the whole community. The community is desperate and engages in prayer. Suddenly an extraordinary person appears (a stranger, ignoramus, bastard, drunkard, baldhead), accomplishes the task by showing extraordinary cleverness or by working miracles, and then mysteriously disappears. The community thanks God for its rescue (see Jason 1965, Nos. 895, 922, \*C, \*D, \*E, \*F).

A folktale is first of all a work of art. To help clarify our question two aspects of it as a literary work will be considered here: the content and the form.

The content: As we said above, to our knowledge such folk stories have not been recorded from other peoples, i.e., while the Cinderella story is told in many societies, tales about the persecution of a Jewish community and its rescue are confined to Jewish society alone.

A close examination of the content of these tales shows that their relation to real life is not a direct one. Historical reality furnished a certain part of the plot material, such as the existence of an inter-ethnic conflict, the existence of an organized Jewish community with which

the rulers deal, the imposition of monetary contributions or forced theological disputes, etc.

The other part of the plot is, however, fantastical: the resolution of the conflict in the tale is in direct opposition to reality. In reality the community had to pay the contribution, or it had to engage in the religious dispute, which always ended with additional persecution. The resolution of the conflict by a miraculous rescue, as it happens in the tale, is unreal and represents a literary device to express and resolve symbolically the conflict between two groups.

Thus, the historical reality of Jewish life presents the problem with which the tale deals and the corresponding parts of the plot; the resolution of the conflict and the corresponding parts of the plot are taken from the stock of the fantastic, which is not strictly bound to the Jewish society but is shared by a whole cultural area. We find that not all of the content of the tale is exclusively Jewish.

The form is the second aspect of the literary work. Let us examine this aspect, here the narrative structure of the tales. Formal literary analysis will provide us with the necessary tools for this investigation. Such tools have been developed by the Russian formalistic school of literary criticism, (see Erlich 1955, Todorov 1965), and applied to oral literature especially by V. IA. Propp (1928-58).

A short exposition of Propp's method is pertinent to our discussion. Propp established certain narrative units and relations between them. He distinguishes two kinds of units: functions, the lower level units which compose a higher level unit, and the move, one or more of which compose a whole tale. A function is an abstract unit of action in the tale which is significant for the development of the plot (Propp 1958:20). The action in a concrete

tale text may be performed in different ways and by different actors. An example of a function is Propp's function No. 12: "hero is put to test." The test to which the hero is put may vary from tale to tale and from culture to culture; so may the personage of the hero and of the tester. Yet the function of "testing the hero" remains the same. A certain sequence of functions, which represent a literary whole, form a move.

Propp analyzed fairy-tales, the most complex prose of oral literature. He found 31 diverse functions that can make a move. Other authors added more functions so as to be able to analyze other kinds of tales (primitive myths: Dundes 1964, Horner 1967; fables: Ben-Amos 1966:153; swindler tales: Jason 1966). The present writer tried to reduce this multitude to a basic move, consisting of three functions. The move is repeated in combinations which show some individuality in each concrete text. It is sometimes connected to another move by special elements in which information is given or transfers in space, time or state are accomplished. These we will call "connectives". Each function consists of three parts:

- (a) the action itself;
- (b) the dramatis persona performing the action—the subject of the action, and
- (c) the dramatis persona in respect to whom the action is performed—the object of action.

In our move only two dramatis personae act: the hero and the donor. The donor can split into two personages: the donor-tester acts in the first function, and the donor-compensator acts in the third function of our move. In the second function the donor is the object of the function and may be either of the two donor types, depending on the concrete text. Our move then looks as follows:



	Subject	Action	Object
function A	Donor-tester	puts Hero to test	Hero
function B	Hero	responds to test (positively/negatively)	Donor
function C	Donor-compensator	rewards/punishes Hero respectively	Hero

Table 1

A function can be active or passive. Table 1 has all the functions in active form. In the passive function Donor and Hero exchange places, i.e., instead of Donor giving Hero the reward, the tale tells how Hero takes the reward by himself, sometimes without even mentioning Donor.

With these tools let us now look at our sacred tales and compare them with a tale from a completely different culture, the Chinese dealing with persecuted barbers. The comparison will show us what the two tales from so different cultures have in common, and how this helps us to answer our question about "the general and the particular."

### EXAMPLES

#### Introduction

Four diverse Jewish texts and one Chinese text (Example No. 5) are here analyzed. The Jewish texts were recorded in recent years from new immigrants to Israel by the Israel Folklore Archives. (About the Archives, their work and the collected materials, see Jason 1965, Noy 1961).

Example 1

(Jewish-East Europe: Avitsuk, J., Ha-ilan she-safag demaot,  
Haifa 1965, No. 7)

Move 1, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile Vizier/King

Move 2, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile King  
donor/compensator - God

Move 3, tale-roles: hero - Gentile King  
donor/compensator - Rabbi

Move 4, tale-roles: hero - Gentile King  
donor - God

Move 5, tale-roles: hero - God  
donor/tester - Jews  
donor/compensator - Gentile King

Comment: The text lacks function C from move 1 and function A from move 3. Function B from move 3 can be further divided into several moves; this, however, would unnecessarily complicate the diagram. The Rabbi himself is endowed with magical powers (stemming from God) and plays the role of the mysterious helpful "stranger." The Vizier is not an evil personage; he just carries information which the King interprets as evil.

Example 1

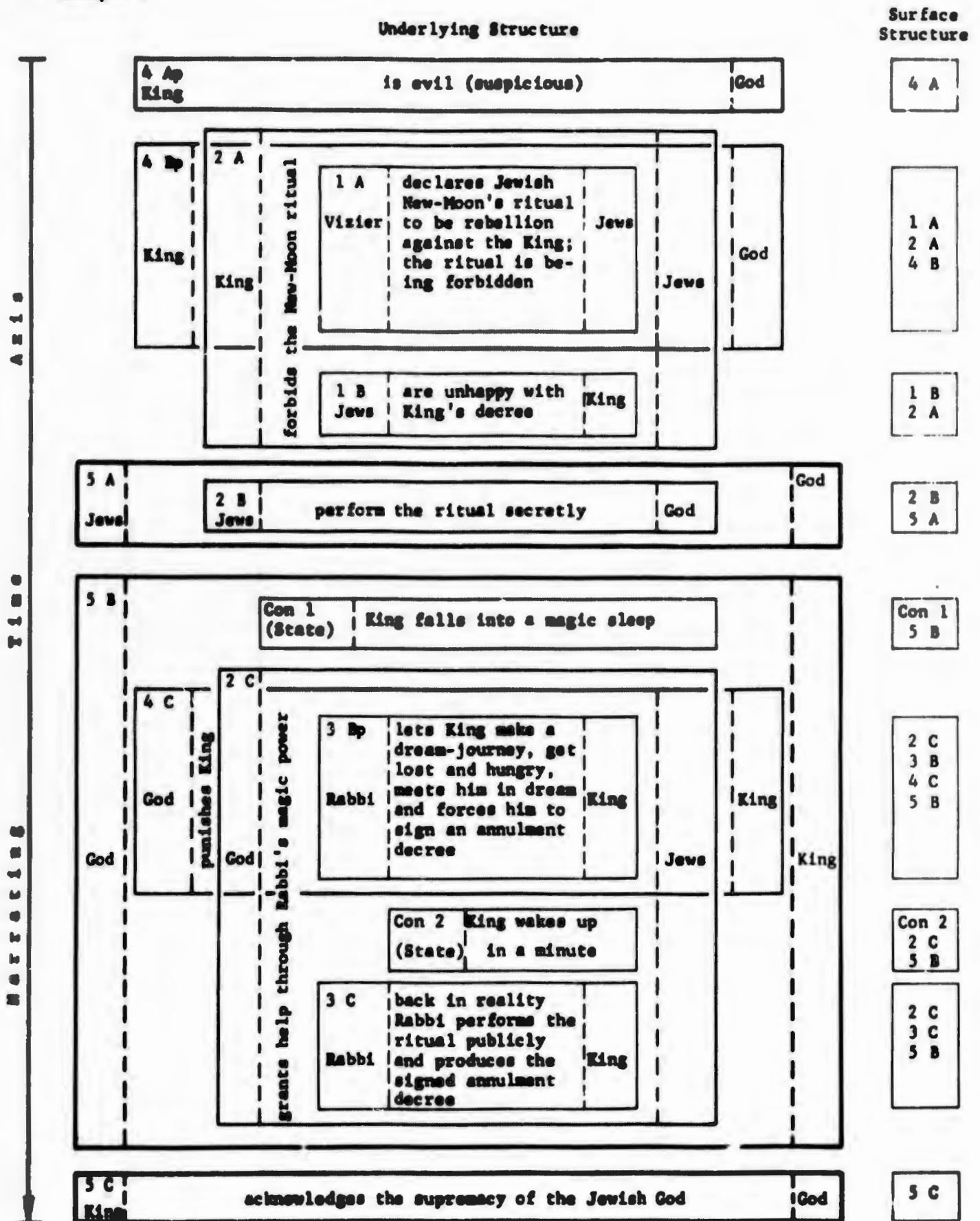


TABLE 1

Example 2

(Jewish-Yemenite: Noy, D., Folktales of Israel, Chicago, 1963, No. 11)

- Move 1, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile Viziers  
donor/compensator - Gentile King
- Move 2, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile King  
donor/compensator - Elijah the Prophet
- Move 3, tale-roles: hero - Gentile King/Viziers  
donor - Rabbi
- Move 4, tale-roles: hero - Gentile Viziers  
donor/tester - God  
donor/compensator - Gentile King
- Move 5, tale-roles: hero - God  
donor/tester - Jews  
donor/compensator - Gentile King

Comment: The immortal Prophet Elijah and the Rabbi together here play the role of the mysterious helpful "stranger." The Gentile representative is also split into two person-ages: the evil Viziers and the actually neutral King. (For texts in homiletic literature see Gaster, 1924, No. 339.)

Example 2

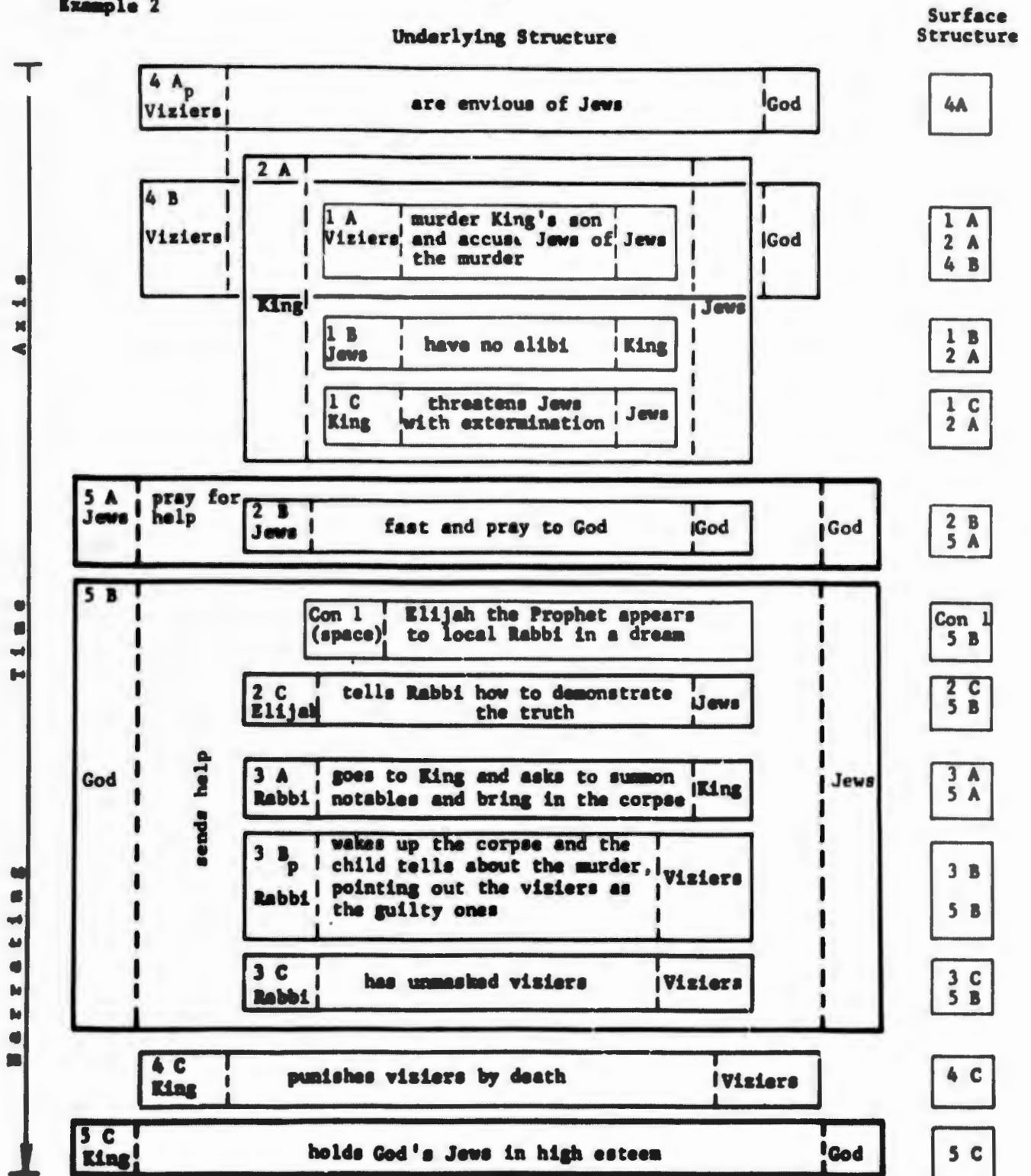


TABLE 2



Example 3

(Jewish-Iraqi: Noy, D., Folktales of Israel, Chicago 1963, No. 38)

Move 1, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor - Gentile Priest

Move 2, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile Priest  
donor/compensator - God

Move 3, tale-roles: hero - Gentile Priest  
donor - Jewish Poulterer

Move 4, tale-roles: hero - Gentile Priest  
donor - God

Move 5, tale-roles: hero - God  
donor/tester - Jews  
donor/compensator - Gentile Priest

Comment: The Poulterer is inspired by God to volunteer to rescue the community. He is an exception in the community by his very poverty and lack of education. In addition, he is physically outside the community, being absent from the town at the critical time and therefore excluded from knowledge of the decree as well as from being in the state of ritual mourner. Poulterer's naive understanding of the Priest's "questions" and his reactions, as well as the Priest's sophisticated understanding of the Poulterer's "answers" are both inspired by higher powers:

<u>P</u> <u>R</u> <u>I</u> <u>E</u> <u>S</u> <u>T</u>		<u>P</u> <u>O</u> <u>U</u> <u>L</u> <u>T</u> <u>E</u> <u>R</u> <u>E</u> <u>R</u>	
Acts	Explanations	Acts	Explanations
1a. points 1 finger	there is only one King		He wants to take one of my eyes out
1b.		points 2 fingers	I will take both his eyes out
	there are 2 Kings, one in heaven second on earth		
2a. shows white cheese	is it from a white or black goat?		He shows that I am hungry, while he has cheese
2b.		shows an egg	I am not in need of your alms
	is it from a white or black hen?		
3a. scatters grain	Jews are scat- tered all over the world		He spilled some grain
3b.		lets a hen loose to eat the grain	A pity to waste grain
	Messiah will come and gather them		

The fact that the Poulterer remains as naive and ignorant after the dispute as he was before it parallels the disappearance of the mysterious helpful "stranger." (For

(For texts in homiletic literature see Gaster, 1924, No. 443. Texts recorded recently from oral tradition are listed under Jason 1965, No. 922 \*C.)

Example 3

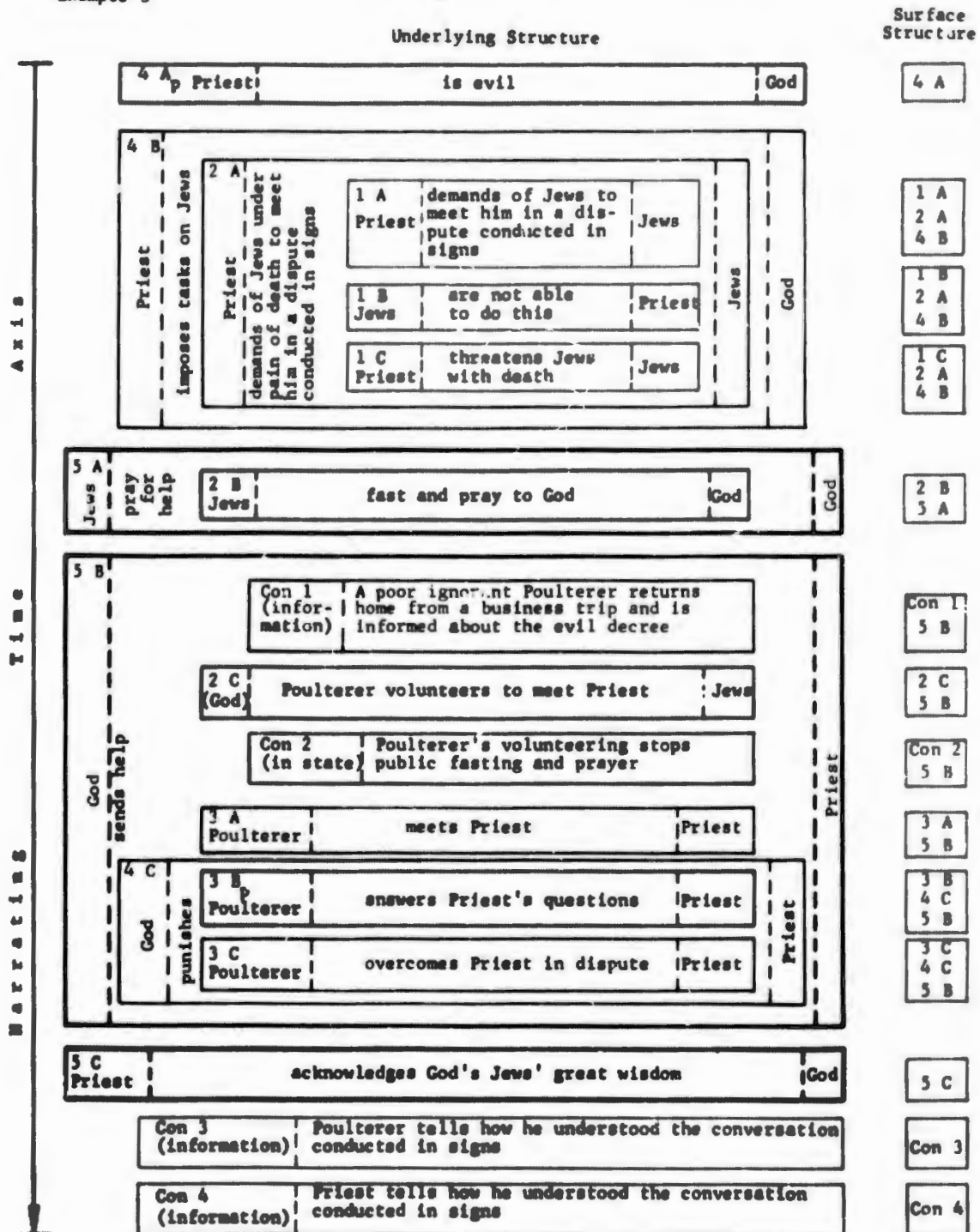


TABLE 3

Example 4

(Jewish-Yemenite: Noy, D., Jefet Schwili erzahlt, Berlin 1963, No. 167)

- Move 1, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor - Gentile King
- Move 2I, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile King  
donor/compensator - God
- Move 2II, tale-roles: hero - Jews  
donor/tester - Gentile King  
donor/compensator - Children of Moses
- Move 3, tale-roles: hero - Gentile King  
donor - girl (from the Children of Moses)
- Move 4, tale-roles: hero - Gentile King  
donor - God
- Move 5, tale-roles: hero - God  
donor/tester - Jews  
donor/compensator - Gentile King

Comment: Move 2 splits into two. Jews are doing as usual, i.e., calling for help to God. But after that they appeal for help elsewhere. They send a messenger to the "Children of Moses"—a fabulous group of Jews believed to be descendants of Moses and to live behind the miraculous river Sambation. Any one of the "Children" possesses magic powers, even a young girl who, as a woman, would normally be excluded from any ritual function. After working her miracle, the girl returns to her country.

It is worth noting that the bible verse (Deut. 32:30) is here understood to mean that God will give Jews the power to perform the miracle of chasing their enemies. In its original context the verse is intended to mean exactly the opposite. It is a threat: God will allow the enemy to overcome the Jews if they commit sin. The available material has been changed for the story's purpose.

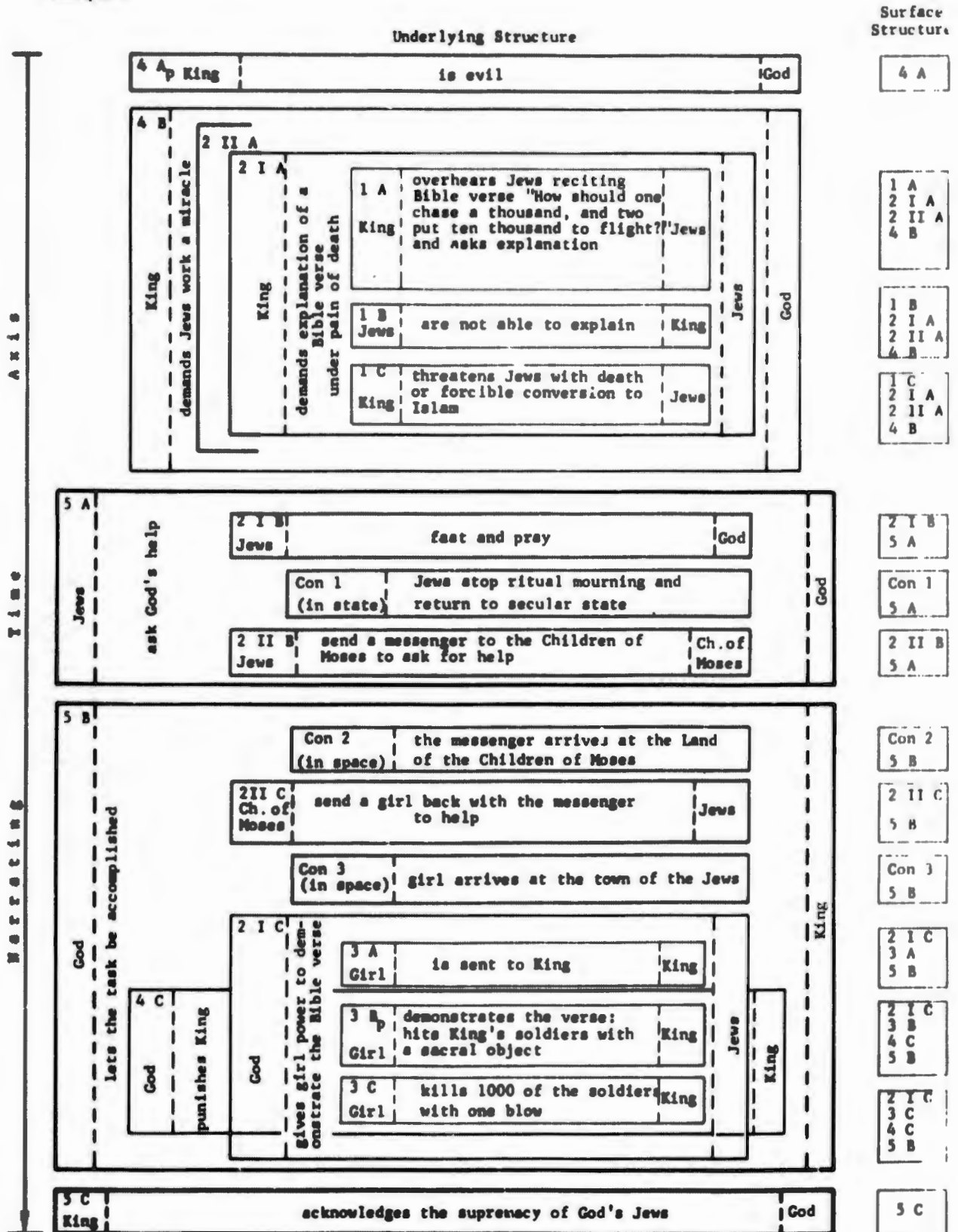
The text as analyzed here is simplified. Fairy-tale moves in which the girl acts as the "clever peasant daughter"

(Aarne-Thompson No. 875), marries the King and causes him troubles until she finally runs away and returns to her country, were omitted as irrelevant to our purpose.

(For parallels in homiletic literature see Gaster, 1924, No. 445.)



Example 4



5 B God
lets the task be accomplished
King

Con 2
the messenger arrives at the Land of the Children of Moses

2 II C Ch. of Moses
send a girl back with the messenger to help
Jews

Con 3
girl arrives at the town of the Jews

2 I C God
Gives girl power to demonstrate the Bible verse
King

3 A Girl
is sent to King
King

3 B Girl
demonstrates the verse: hits King's soldiers with a sacred object
King

3 C Girl
kills 1000 of the soldiers with one blow
King

4 C God
punishes King

5 C King
acknowledges the supremacy of God's Jews
God

4 A

1 A  
2 I A  
2 II A  
4 B

1 B  
2 I A  
2 II A  
4 B

1 C  
2 I A  
2 II A  
4 B

2 I B  
5 A

Con 1  
5 A

2 II B  
5 A

Con 2  
5 B

2 II C  
5 B

Con 3  
5 B

2 I C  
3 A  
5 B

2 I C  
3 B  
4 C  
5 B

2 I C  
3 C  
4 C  
5 B

5 C

TABLE 4

Example 5

(Chinese: Eberhard, W., Folktales of China, Chicago, 1965, No. 40).

- Move 1, tale-roles: hero - barbers  
donor/tester - Scalp Disease of Emperor  
Donor/Compensator - Emperor
- Move 2, tale-roles: hero - Barbers  
donor/tester - Emperor  
donor/compensator - Heavens
- Move 3, tale-roles: hero - Disease  
donor - God Lǚ Tung Pin
- Move 4, tale-roles: hero - Emperor  
donor - Gods (incl. L T P)
- Move 5, tale-roles: hero - God L T P  
donor - Barbers

Comment: In the tale the Emperor's Disease seems to be a personage: it could be a parallel to the "evil Vizier," while the Emperor could be the neutral King. It is only because of the Disease that the Emperor oppresses the Barbers. When he is healed, the Disease is "killed". This is a punishment for the Disease, which could be a parallel to the punishment of the evil Vizier. God L.T.P. could parallel the mysterious helpful "stranger" who is sent/inspired by God. In this tale it is the Jade Emperor, the supreme deity in the Chinese pantheon, to whom the Barbers pray and who sends L.T.P. to help. In Jewish tales in general such explicit heavenly scenes are rare.

Example 5

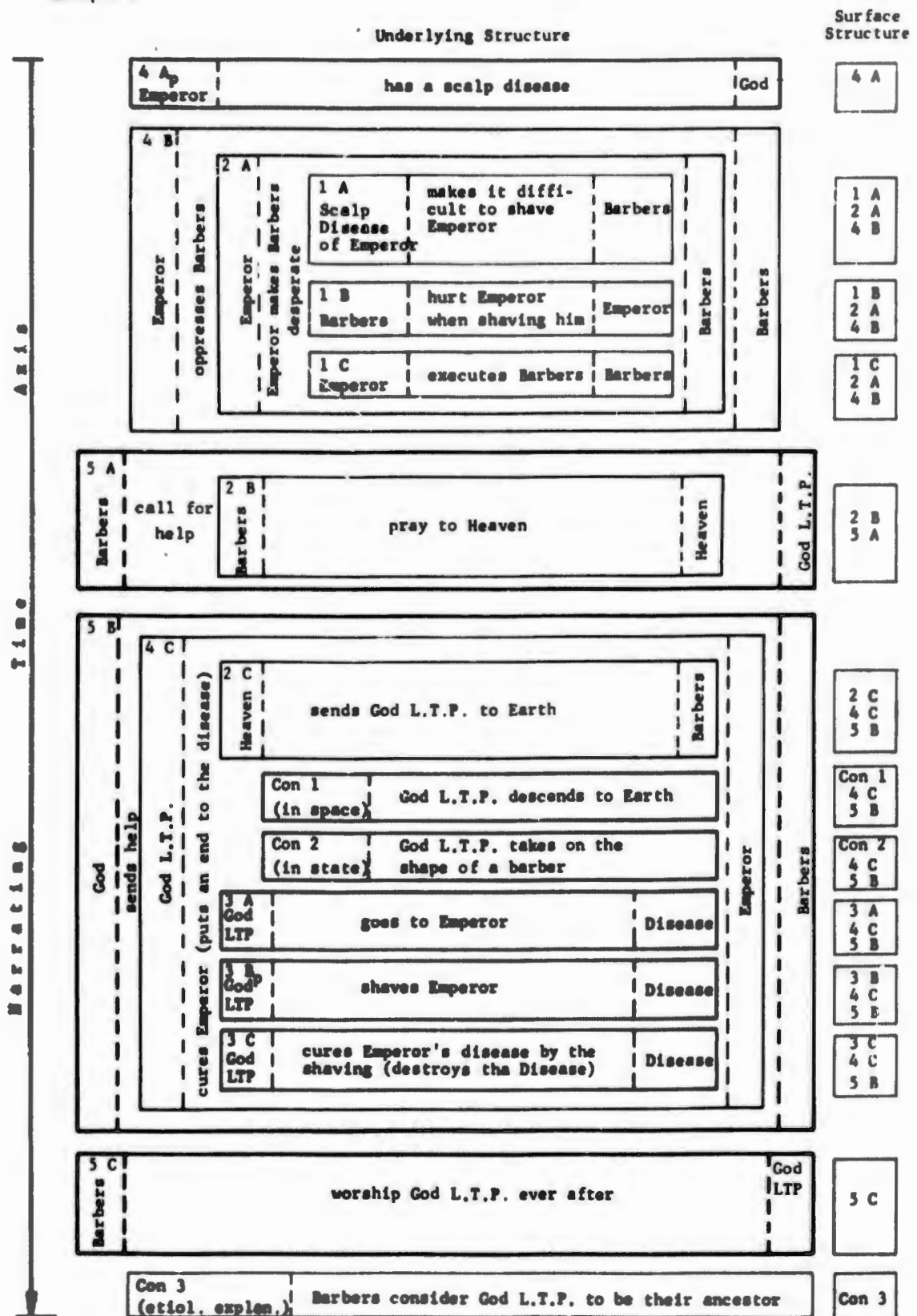


TABLE 5

COMPARISON OF THE EXAMPLES  
(surface structure columns)

I	E	W	I	S	H	CHINESE
1	2	3	4	5		
4A	4A	4A	4A			4A
1A 2A 4B	1A 2A 4B	1A 2A 4B	1A 2A 4B	1A 2IA, 2IIA 4B		1A 2A 4B
1B 2A	1B 2A	1B 2A 4B	1B 2A 4B	1B 2IA, 2IIA 4B		1B 2A 4B
	1C 2A	1C 2A 4B	1C 2A 4B	1C 2IA, 2IIA 4B		1B 2A 4B
2B 5A	2B 5A	2B 5A	2B 5A	2IB 5A		2B 5A
			con 1 5A			
			2IIB 5A			
con 1 5B	con 1 5B	con 1 5B	con 2 5B			
2C 3B 4C 5B	2C 5B	2C 5B	2IIC 5B			2C 4C 5B
		con 2 5B	con 3 5B			con 1 4C 5B
						con 2 4C 5B
con 2 2C 3A 5B	3A 5B	3A 5B	2IC 3A 5B			3A 4C 5B
	3B 4C 5B	3B 4C 5B	2IC 3B 4C 5B			3B 4C 5B
2C 3C 5B	3C 5B	3C 4C 5B	2IC 3C 4C 5B			3C 4C 5B
	4C					
5C	5C	5C	5C			5C
		con 3				con 3
		con 4				

TABLE 6

### Comment

There is basic similarity among the structures of the five texts. Each text has, of course, secondary individual features, as the texts are composed anew with each retelling, and not learned by heart. (The peculiarities of each text have been pointed out in comments to them.) The difference between the Chinese text and the Jewish texts is not greater than the differences among the Jewish texts themselves.

### DISCUSSION

The structural similarity of the tales from the two cultures is obvious. In each case this similar formal frame is filled by a story (content), the features of which are taken from the respective culture. The relation of the tale's content to reality is the same in both cases: the conflict is in some measure a direct reflection of reality (Jewish communities were persecuted; the Emperor had the power of life and death over his subjects, including the barbers, etc.); the resolution of the conflict stands in an inverted relation to reality and is in addition fantastical (while in reality there was no relief for the persecuted, in the tale God rescues them). Moreover, in both cases the tale functions in the same manner in the society of its bearers: the Jewish tale establishes the sacral superiority of its society over the Gentile oppressor; the Chinese tale connects a social group (caste?) to sacral powers as being descendants of the worshipped deity who rescued them from a social oppressor. In both bases the society is affirmed by the sacred power in the face of oppression, and its self-consciousness is raised.

Returning to the more general question of the national peculiarities of oral literature we find that the sacred tale is composed in the same manner as the "Jewish" joke: a universal literary model is used and "filled" with a content appropriate to the particular culture. Thus the



answer to our original question: is this tale an original Jewish product will be: it is and it is not. All four of the circumstances mentioned earlier that support our supposition of a pure Jewish origin of the tale are bound to the content aspect of the tale; yet content cannot exist without form.

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