

A Renewed Hope: A.M. Klein's Second Scroll as a Response to Destruction

The semi-autobiographical *Second Scroll* is A. M. Klein's contribution to the tradition of creative responses to Jewish destructions. First published in 1951 after a trip to the newly formed State of Israel; Klein's novel expresses an awareness of the hopefulness that was felt by contemporary Jews, which was inspired by the ostensible miracle that was the declaration of the state just a few short years after the decimation of the European Jewry. Though the novel has obvious allusions to the Five Books of Moses, Klein appears to have also followed in the tradition of the prophetic books, in particular Ezekiel. In order to put forward his response to the destruction of the European Jewry and the implications of the creation of the State of Israel, Klein used the books in the Hebrew bible that dealt with destruction and rebirth. Ezekiel is a proper source of inspiration as it is attributed to the period of the destruction of the first temple, the Babylonian exile, and the return to Jerusalem; the prophecies offer a response to the destruction of the temple and the exile, as Marvin A. Sweeney states:

*He [Ezekiel] wrestles with the problems posed by the tragedies of Jerusalem's destruction and the Babylonian exile: Why did God allow the Temple and Jerusalem to be destroyed? Why did God allow the people of Israel to be carried away into exile? What future is there for Israel?*¹

Klein's goal with his creative work is to offer a theological response to the destruction of the Jews in Europe by following in the tradition of the biblical authors who responded to their own experiences of destruction. He does so without mentioning sin, despite it being a

popular convention in the biblical narratives, because the old explanation of destruction being divine retribution for Israel's abandonment of the covenant simply cannot be used to explain the massive destruction of the Holocaust. Instead Klein focuses on the hopeful messages within the biblical prophecies and offers his own message of hope focused on the land of Israel and the people he encounters therein.

Klein understands the destruction of the European Jewry to be a part of the larger cycle of Jewish history, dating back to the biblical era. Spiro states:

*This cycle of repetition is the underlying theme of The Second Scroll. The original "scroll", Klein asserts, is being repeated in contemporary history. The dramatic take of the Bible, the formation and birth of a people, their suffering, exodus, wandering, and final arrival at their destination, the Holy Land, is being relived. As in the year-end ceremony, the reading of the "scroll" commences anew, so in history ancient events being again.*²

Klein's take on time being cyclical, particularly in relation to Jewish history, is made evident in the chapter Deuteronomy, "A year of the reading of the Law had been concluded, a year was beginning anew, the last verses of Deuteronomy joined the first of Genesis, the

¹ The Jewish Publication Society, The Jewish Study Bible, eds, Berlin Aele and Marc Zvi Brettler, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1042.

² S.J, Spiro, Tapestry for Designs: Judaic Allusions in the Second Scroll and the Collected Poems of A.M. Klein, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), 120.

eternal circle continued.³³The Simchas Torah celebration is cut short for the narrator's family upon their finding that the famed Uncle Melech has been witness to a pogrom in Ratno, where the family had lived before arriving in Montreal. The juxtaposition of Simchas Torah and the details of the pogrom create a link between the two events, as if to regard the pogrom itself as a sort of regular event in the Jewish calendar cycle. Klein's concept of time is also seen in his treatment of the Holocaust; by relying on a biblical framework for his novel, and inserting certain images that correspond to the biblical responses to destruction, Klein situates the Holocaust within the ever-repeating cycle of Jewish history. He does in the part of the novel in which the narrator reads the letter from his Uncle Melech, in which Melech interprets the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel:

The seven colours that Michelangelo had used are to him a rainbow pledging cessation of flood. His people might be maimed but, as a people, could not be destroyed. The Creation of the Sun and Moon he therefore reads as a foretelling of survival; the planets spring back into place for those for whom the heavens had been darkened.⁴

Melech interprets sections of the Sistine Chapel as a message about the promise of redemption. Since the beginning of time in memorial, God's chosen people have undergone trials, which may have appeared as though the nation had been abandoned. However just as the rainbow symbolizes God's pledge to never destroy His people by flood, "I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth."⁵ Melech concludes that God will never abandon His people. Klein includes the recent destruction within Jewish history through Melech's interpretation, as he visits

the Sistine Chapel after surviving the Holocaust and while going through a crisis of faith. Melech affirms his faith in God after seeing the ceiling and remembering the promise of redemption that has sustained the Jewish people through every other catastrophe in their history. Spiro writes about Klein and the biblical cycle of time, "he learns that, for the Jewish people at least, history moves forward in biblical cycles of suffering and

redemption. In the Bible the Jews rebel and are punished, then they repent and are saved."⁶ Klein leaves behind the biblical notion of punishment, though he retains the aspects of suffering and redemption, as they are integral to his goal of putting forth a hopeful response to the destruction.

Klein borrows from the prophetic book Ezekiel in order to get his message of hope for the future of Israel across and to make it fit within the biblical tradition. Ezekiel contains a message about the hopeful redemption of Israel after the destruction of the Temple and exile of the Israelites to Babylonia, "Yet say: Thus said the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the Land of Israel."⁷ The prophet Ezekiel was responding to the national catastrophe that was taking place around him and he interpreted the signs in order to give meaning to the events and to offer consolation to the Israelites in distress; that though it seemed as though they had been abandoned by God, this was not the case and they would return to Israel once again. Klein is adding to the tradition by imagining the new state of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical and personal prophecy:

I dreamed in the dingy Hebrew school the apocalyptic dream of a renewed Zion, I always

imagined it coming to pass thus: first I heard the roar and thunder of the battle of Gog and Magog; then, as silence fell, I saw through my mind's eye a great black aftermath cloud filling the heavens across the whole length of the humped horizon. The cloud then began to scatter, to be diminished, to subside, until revealed there shone the glory of a burnished dome – Hierosolyma the golden! Then lower it descended and lower, a mere breeze dispersed it, and clear was the horizon and before me there extended an undulating sun-lit landscape.⁸

Klein's creative imagining of the renewed Zion is dependent upon a battle between Israel and Gog and Magog; the nation can only rise up in glory if it is first threatened by outside forces which, for Klein, allows for the Holocaust to act as the catalyst for the renewed Zion. Ezekiel has an especially strong tradition of renewal after a battle between Israel against Gog and Magog, which illustrates God's promise to protect Israel, "On that day, when Gog sets foot on the soil of Israel – declares the Lord God – My raging anger shall flare up."⁹ Ezekiel continues:

And I will send a fire against Magog and against those who dwell secure in the coastlands. And they shall know that I am the Lord. I will make My holy name known among My people Israel, and never again will I let My holy name be profaned. And the nations shall know that I the Lord am holy in Israel.¹⁰

Klein and the Ezekiel author have confidence in the promises of the covenant between God and Israel; that they are a protected nation and that hardships only strengthen the bond between God and Israel and allow for miraculous intervention on Israel's behalf. Klein sees in the creation of the state of Israel a few years after the end of World War II as a miracle.

Klein, in fact, sees miracles throughout his travels within Israel, which help to place Second Scroll within the same genre as Ezekiel, and as a response to national destruction.

Regarding the new population of Israel, Klein writes, "Wonderful is the engrafting of skin, but more wonderful the million busy hushed cells, in secret planning, stitching, stretching, until – the wound is vanished, the blood courses normal, the cicatrice falls off."¹¹ The narrator

sees a miracle, or a potential miracle in the state of Israel. He uses the metaphor of a wound to explain the Holocaust; the wound gets engrafted with 'healthy' skin, which is essentially a superficial solution, as grafted skin never appears normal. However, Klein imagines that the new inhabitants of Israel will be able to heal themselves; by multiplying and raising Jewish children and through continuing to live as Jews despite the catastrophe they have experienced. Through the survivor's propagation of the new generations of Jews, they can eventually heal the wound of the Holocaust and miraculously leave no scar, as though the new population of Israel can return the world's population of Jews back to normal. The theme of miraculous rejuvenation appears throughout Klein's novel as illustrated in the narrator's conversation with the dauphin in Morocco:

It was thus that he had seen Israel in one single saltation leap from the marginalia of Europe back to the center and body of its past and future. Whether the Essence now before

³ A.M. Klein, *The Second Scroll*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1951), 5.

⁴ Klein, 42-43.

⁵ JPS, Gen. 9:13.

⁶ Spiro, 138.

⁷ JPS, Ezekiel. 11: 17.

⁸ Klein, 13.

*us would be of the same transcendence and glory as that of the past remained to be seen. This was one of the reasons for his own journey to Israel. One thing, however, was certain: pulverized, etherealized Jewry had put on flesh again. It was our version of the Incarnation.*¹²

By using the Christian belief of the Incarnation, Klein addresses the status of Jews under the Nazi regime, which marginalized the Jews to the point of treating them as animals or non-humans. However, with the declaration of the state of Israel, the nation had gone from sub-human to human again, and would no longer be susceptible to inhumane treatment on a national level. Israel, as Klein understood it, allowed the surviving European Jewry the opportunity to live as human being again and no longer as numbers or statistics. They were once again in charge of their own destiny and no longer victims of intolerant policies. After everything they had been through, the miracles of survival and a national identity would help to head the scars.

Klein's use of imagery involving bones healing themselves or rising up is an obvious borrowing from the famous passage in Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones,

*I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone matching bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; but there was no breath in them.*¹³

Klein relates the valley of dry bones scene to the Holocaust by associating the bones to the victims. He does this quite well in Gloss Gimel, in which Melech does his own interpretation of the art within the Sistine Chapel:

*Certainly I could not look upon those limbs, well fleshed and the colour of health, each in its proper socket, each as of yore ordained, without recalling to mind another scattering of limbs, other conglomerations of bodies the disjunct members of which I had but recently beheld. For as I regarded the flights of athletes above me the tint subcutaneous of well-being faded, the flesh dwindled, the bones showed, and I saw again the relicts of the camps, entire cairns of cadavers, heaped and golgotha'd: a leg growing from its owner's neck, an arm extended from another's shoulder, wrist by jawbone, ear on ankle: the human form divine crippled, jackknifed, trussed, corded: reduced and broken down to its named bones, femur and tibia and clavicle and ulna and thorax and pelvis and cranium: the bundled ossuaries: all their several social heapings heaped to be taken up by the mastodon bulldozer and scavengered into its sistine limepit.*¹⁴

What Melech saw on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was not the actual depictions of human and divine bodies, but the horrors that he had encountered during the European destruction. The way in which Melech described the bodies on the ceiling is identical to how one imagines the dead bodies thrown in the self dug mass graves at the massacre sights throughout Europe. The passage from Ezekiel resonates throughout Melech's interpretation of the Sistine Chapel, partly because of the imagery of the bones strewn about but also because of aspects of his language that are similar to what is found in the bible, e.g. flesh and bone. Despite Melech's woeful interpretation of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Klein also draws from the Valley of Dry Bones passage for its message of hope, healing, and renewal. Klein does so in his illustration of the miracle that was taking place on the streets of Israel with the rejuvenation of the Hebrew language, "It

was as if I was spectator to the healing of torn flesh, or heard a broken bone come together, set, and grow again."¹⁵ The narrator envisions himself as an Ezekiel-like prophet, bearing witness to the Hebrew language rising again to a new life, just as the biblical Ezekiel saw with the bones. The passage in Ezekiel is therefore a very important passage for Klein as it can be interpreted in light of the Holocaust, the declaration of the state of Israel, and the feelings of rejuvenation and hope that Klein sensed during his trip to Israel. The feeling of hope and security that is manifested in the state of Israel is experienced by Melech at the end of his visit to the Sistine Chapel, "Uncle Melech was not content with deducing from the frescoes their prophesies of doom and slaughter; triumphantly he deduced from them also the sure promise of survival."¹⁶

Klein addresses the theological problems that arise out of the history of the Holocaust, just as the author of Ezekiel was forced to face the theological implications of the destruction of the first Temple. Klein clearly struggles with the recent history as he equates the destruction of the European Jewry to a holocaust, a burnt offering:

*They are all of a piece; only now it is not blood that is the tale, but the white leukemia of ash. How could this scene – this cattle issued from what cattle-cars, these sheep to slaughter led, these goats, these azzazels – speak otherwise to me than of recent furnaces and holocausts? Only before those latter fires it was the human form that lay prostrate and bound, bleating; while the cornuted heads readied the blade and the faggot. The horror of his own prophesy abashed him, this scene the angel would not limn; there rises, therefore, before the nostrils of Noah the incense of the fat of fed beasts. But the odour is the odour of the fume of humanity.*¹⁷

Klein's use of sacrificial imagery to describe the horrors of the destruction of the European Jews; through the cattle car transports and most notably, the ovens is contrasted against the ultimate hopefulness inherent within the novel. While it may appear that Klein was cynically equating the destruction of the Jews with the ancient practice of animal sacrifice. However, Klein was commenting on the perpetrators of the destruction themselves, how people, "denied the godliness of all flesh but their own."¹⁸ The images upon the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel not only represented to Melech the victims of the destruction, "these sheep to slaughter led"; Melech also saw the perpetrators of the violence. How their actions were fueled by ideologies that made them believe that they were cleansing Europe, only instead of the blood of beasts they used the ash and fat of humanity. Klein creates a link between the destruction of the Jews and the aftermath of the great flood by making mention of the sacrifice that Noah offered:

*And Noah built an altar to the LORD and he took fro every clean cattle and every clean fowl and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the Lord smelled the fragrant odor and the LORD said in His heart "I will not again damn the soil on humankind's score. For the deavings of the human heart are evil from youth..."*¹⁹

⁹ JPS, Ezekiel 38: 18

¹⁰ JPS, Ezekiel 39: 6-7.

¹¹ Klein, 82.

¹² Klein, 67.

¹³ JPS, Ezekiel 37: 7-9.

¹⁴ Klein, 106-107.

¹⁵ Klein, 82.

¹⁶ Klein, 42.

¹⁷ Klein, 109.

¹⁸ Klein, 108.

¹⁹ Robert, Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004.) 8: 20 -21.

The sacrifice offered by Noah appeases God and allows Him to reflect on the evil nature of humanity.²⁰ Because of the inherent evilness of humanity God decides that He will never again destroy the world by flood and decides to make a covenant with Noah, which compliments the significance of Noah's task of re-populating the world. The underlying themes of the flood narrative are new beginnings and life after destruction; however there is also the realization that humanity is capable of great evil. Klein picks up on those themes and uses them in his response to the latest destruction to comment on the evilness of the perpetrators of the destruction of the Jews in Europe. He is able to continue along the lines of hope by linking the recent history with the flood story because Noah survived the flood and re-populated the earth, which is what Klein witnessed in Israel. Klein does not equate the destruction of the European Jews with the ancient sacrifice, but with humanities' capacity for evil, the Jews are only a sacrifice in the capacity that they fell victim to the human inclination.

Klein creates an interesting juxtaposition in this part of the novel, he pairs his take on human nature and evil with a part of a passage from Isaiah, which Spiro translates as, "For what purpose to me is the multitude of your victims [sacrifices], says the L-rd.... I am full of burnt offering.... I do not want [any]; your] incense is an abomination to me."²¹ Klein perhaps interprets the passage from Isaiah to signify an end to the victimization of the Jewish people. In light of the destruction, God calls an end to 'sacrifice' so that the Jews will no longer be sacrificed now that they have returned to their homeland. In combining elements from the flood narrative and the prophet Isaiah, with his own understanding of the recent destruction, Klein provides an answer for the theological implications of the destruction. He illustrates how the near elimination of the Jews at the hands of

the Nazis was not a punishment for Jewish sin, which is how the biblical tradition would have explained it, instead he attributes it to human evil, a facet of humanities' being that God is aware of and dismayed by, but which is ultimately out of His control.

Second Scroll is a response to national tragedy that borrows from biblical sources but adapts them to suit the mindset of the audience, who would not be keen to hear the destruction of Europe's Jews was a punishment for their own inequities. Klein actively avoided attributing the destruction to sin, though that left him to answer to the theological questions that followed, if not because of sin, then why? He responds by attributing the destruction to evil; a move that allowed him to explain the destruction, imbues it with a modicum of meaning, and is ultimately able to retain his faith in God. Like his biblical predecessors, Klein successfully carries across a message of hope for the future of Israel:

*The people endured; floated out the flood, defied the furnace. With their foretold salvation fulfilled, there revived also into existence and shone bright the worlds and planets which without man their beholder are as if they were not. The clouds vanished, and the sky was starred again; the clouds vanished, and the sun shone. Upon the breath of little children is the whole globe poised, say the talmudists; and say: every human soul is weighted against worlds three hundred and ten. Oh, the proliferation in the heavens as the dry bones stirred.*²²

Melech does not lose his faith because he sees in the Sistine Chapel God's promise to protect Israel, His people. Klein, through Melech's let-

²⁰ Alter, 97.

²¹ Spiro, 168.

²² Klein, 113.

ter, relies on the biblical stories of destruction and renewal; Noah's family surviving the flood, Daniel's kin surviving Nebuchadnezzar's oven, and Ezekiel bearing witness to the destruction of the Temple followed by God's promise to return the people to the land. Perhaps Klein felt that the destruction experienced by the European Jews and their subsequent return to the Holy Land after two thousand years of exile, was a historical event tantamount to miracle and belonging in the record of Jewish history alongside the stories, which have been the foundation of Jewish faith. Klein inserts the destruction into the Jewish cycle of time through his use of biblical imagery, particularly from Ezekiel and the flood story. He equates the destruction of Europe's Jewry alongside the biblical destruction of Solomon's Temple as national and theological disasters. However, he finds the solution in the new state of Israel, which he sees as the miracle that followed the destruction so that contemporary Jews can rebuild their nation as Noah's family re-built humanity.

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