

A TWENTIETH CENTURY PENTATEUCH

A. M. KLEIN'S *The Second Scroll*

M. W. Steinberg

SINCE ITS PUBLICATION in 1951, A. M. Klein's *The Second Scroll* has been recognised by discerning critics as an outstanding novel and yet—surprisingly in view of the author's considerable reputation as a poet—it has received scant attention. It is, indeed, a story of complicated form, in which, on the simple framework of a nephew's search for a long-lost uncle, Klein weaves a moving pattern of contemporary Jewish history seen as the fulfilment of age-old religious and national aspirations. The return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, regarded as a miracle manifested by God, establishes in part the religious theme of the novel. Concurrent with the development of this theme and bearing on it is the question of faith in God and the acceptance of His ways.

The historical context in which the story takes place is the period between 1917, when pogroms in Russia terrorized the Jewish population, and 1949, a year following the establishment of the state in Israel. It contains, therefore, an account of the sufferings of the Jews in exile, the exodus from Europe, the land of their enslavement, and the return to the Promised Land. It parallels in this respect the *first scroll*, the Old Testament, as the history of the Jewish people. The parallel, which is obviously indicated by the title of the book and by the chapter headings, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, is carried further as Klein sees in contemporary events, in the achievements of the Jewish people, the working out of their destiny—a working out that is for him explicable only in religious terms. And further, just as the Torah comprises not

merely the Bible, but also the commentaries on it—the Talmud, for example—which expand upon the events in the Five Books and explain them, completing the message, so too in Klein's *The Second Scroll* there are five glosses which elaborate upon or which help us interpret events in the story. The parallel so obviously indicated in the structure suggests more than actually obtains in the material. There is little or no direct connection, for instance, between the Book of Leviticus and the chapter Leviticus in the novel, or between the rabbinical discussions in the Talmud and Klein's glosses. The pentateuchal form of *The Second Scroll* with the Biblical labels, may be justified, however, by the major thematic parallels of the two scrolls.

The central theme of the story is established at the outset. Melech Davidson, a pious scholar, appalled by the atrocities which he witnessed in Russia in 1917, renounced his faith and sundered himself from his people because he could not reconcile his belief in a loving and just God with the unspeakable depravities which He permitted. No longer able to depend on God for justice, he joined the Communist Party to help bring it about, and he devoted his zeal and dialectical skill, acquired in the study of the Talmud, to the service of his new master. The German-Soviet pact of 1939, which resulted in the handing over of three and a half million Jews in eastern Europe to the Nazis, made him believe that his Marxist ideology had been "a saying of grace before poison" and he abandoned this faith too.

Thus spiritually isolated and bewildered he existed until rounded up with the rest of the Jews of Kamenets for extermination. Finding himself, by accident or miracle, the sole survivor of the massacre at Kamenets, he felt the need to identify himself completely with the martyred Jews and to express their lives through his own. In a letter which his nephew received just before his departure for Israel, Uncle Melech wrote, "At times I feel—so bewildered and burdened is my gratitude—that the numbered dead run through my veins their plasma, that I must live their unexpired six million circuits, and that my body must be the bed of each of their nightmares".

His re-affiliation with the Jewish people was advanced by his intellectual and spiritual experience on viewing the magnificent figures by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. He was directed to the art treasures by Monsignor Piersanti, a subtle fisher for souls in troubled waters (typi-

cal of those who hovered in and around Displaced Persons' Camps in Europe shortly after the war) who hoped to win a Jewish convert to Roman Catholicism by impressing the sensitive faith-seeker with the glories of Christian art. But Uncle Melech's interpretation of Michelangelo's pictorial sermon had an opposite effect. The panels exalting the human form, glorifying the flesh, reminded him of the wracked and wrecked bodies in the Nazi slaughter-camps; the panels depicting Biblical scenes establishing the kinship of God and man made him aware that human slaughter is also deicide. The interpretation of Christian art by Christian history for Uncle Melech led not only to a rejection of Christianity but to its indictment. Some of the frescoes, particularly "The Separation of Light from Darkness", were positive in their assertions prophesying for him life, not destruction. In a long circular sentence in which, says the narrator, he distinguished between commas, in parentheses, all the thirteen credos of Maimonides, Uncle Melech climaxed and completed this spiritual experience. Thus the paintings of the Sistine Chapel led the uncle to a re-affirmation of Judaism.

Through incident and symbol, Klein goes on to suggest that more than an individual re-affirmation is involved. Uncle Melech, we learn, delayed his departure for Israel. Like his Biblical forebears who, according to the commentaries, had to wander for forty years in the desert to be cleansed of their slave mentality, to be welded into one and to be purified before ascending into the Promised Land, he, too, who had "not yet got the 'galuth' [exile] out of his system", had to purge himself of his ambivalent attitude towards his former life, his loving and hating it at the same time. For this he had to experience the suffering of the "galuth" to the full, "to feel in his own person", as his friend Krongold said, "and upon his own neck the full weight of the yoke of exile", and in so doing achieve a sense of oneness with all, even the most wretched. With this in mind Uncle Melech, the European Jew, went off to Casablanca where he mingled and merged with the humblest of all Jews, the inhabitants of the *mellah*. There, though he soon made himself *persona non grata* with the authorities, he persisted in denouncing violently the filth, the humiliation and submissiveness characteristic of life in the *mellah*. In a symbolic gesture that proved he was not an "outsider" philanthropically aiding rather remote alien fellow-religionists, but rather was one with "his Sephardic brothers", he led a procession of lame and blind beggars to free

their imprisoned fellows. At this point Klein indicates the changing role of Uncle Melech through the symbol of a photograph. When the nephew, who has not yet seen the face of his uncle or its photographic image, is shown Uncle Melech's picture in Casablanca, he discovers it to be "a double, a multiple exposure". He describes his flight over the Mediterranean to Israel as "an ascension, a going forward in which I was drawn on and on by the multiple-imaged appearing and disappearing figure of Uncle Melech". Then in Israel, where the nephew traces Uncle Melech, the identification of the Uncle with all Jewry is complete, for wherever the nephew looks, the stances, the faces, even the names of people, all evoke in him possibilities of his Uncle. When the process of the Uncle's merging into the people of Israel is complete, the individual disappears from the scene, murdered by Arab marauders. It is clear that Uncle Melech is to be taken as *the Jew* in exile, and his experiences, his divagations from the faith—his enticement to other ways and beliefs—are those of his people, as are his sufferings, the burden of the "galuth", and his eternal quest for truth and justice, and his final ascendance to the Promised Land.

AS THE ROLE of the Uncle undergoes change, the meaning of the nephew's search, its purpose, becomes clearer. The thread of narrative is the journey of a Jewish-Canadian journalist to the new state of Israel to discover for his publishers the poetry of the re-born people. A second and more important strand of narrative grows out of this as the nephew determines to track down his uncle while in Europe, a search that takes him to three continents. The subtly suggested shift from the literal to the symbolic in the presentation of Uncle Melech shapes and gives new levels of meaning to the external framework. The young Canadian Jew, it is suggested, separated from his European relations, is not sufficiently involved in their fate. Though his concern with their tragedy and their future in Israel is real, one feels that it is also somewhat remote, belonging to the realm of dreams, of abstract fancyings. His life, he said, "was, and is bound to the country of my father's choice, to Canada". Uncle Melech reminds him in the letter that, "we

were all in that burning world, even you who were separated from it by the Atlantic—that futile bucket”. His experiences in America, however, differed so greatly from those of his Uncle in Europe that communication between them ceased. Not having seen even a photograph of his Uncle, as we are told at the beginning of the story, he had no steady conception of the reality, and he comments, “as the years went by and I myself changed from year to year, the image of Uncle Melech . . . also suffered its transformations”. His decision to visit his Uncle, described as “a deflecting compulsion”, stemmed from his sense of family obligation, and it is his feeling of family pride that determined his continuing the search when he learned of his Uncle’s possible conversion to Roman Catholicism. Following his Uncle’s trail through Europe, North Africa and Israel, led him, however, to an understanding of his Uncle’s life, past, present and future; for the Uncle, during the course of the search, had become the symbol of the Jewish people. With this understanding came a sense of belonging, of kinship with all Jews. His journey and search for the Uncle became a search for identification. Now that he was in rapport with the spirit of his people he was able to fulfil his original mission, which was to find and evaluate the poetry of the re-born people. He discovered it not so much in the formal writings of the poets, in the sentimental pastoral lyrics of the kibbutz-dwellers, the stirring songs of the nationalists, the nostalgic, plaintive hymns of the religious, or the cryptic utterances of the mystics, but rather in the poetic imagination of the people as a whole, which was most clearly revealed for him in their actions and in the process of vocabulary-building necessary for the resurrection of the Hebrew language as a medium of daily intercourse.

Klein develops his theme further, still in accord with Jewish tradition. In the restrained speeches at the funeral of Uncle Melech, the Israeli mention not only “how he had become a kind of mirror, an *aspaklaria*, of the events of our time”, but also “how he had through the sheer force of his existence again in our life naturalized the miracle”. At the same time that Uncle Melech was becoming increasingly the symbol of the Jewish people he symbolized the Messiah concept. He literally rose from the dead in the mass grave at Kamenets, and taking on himself the burden of his people, he figuratively brought the dead to life through his own life, actions traditionally ascribed to the Messiah who is to come. The symbolic gesture at Casablanca, where Uncle Melech joined the lame and

blind beggars may well have been suggested by a story in the Talmud concerning the Messiah. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi in his search for the Messiah was directed by Elijah the Prophet to the market-place in Rome, where the Messiah would be sitting among the blind beggars and cripples, attending to their wounds. Furthermore, Uncle Melech's name clearly establishes his Messianic role: Melech (King) Davidson (David's son) is none other than Messiah, who is commonly referred to as Messiah ben David (David's son) or simply as "Son of David". There is no contradiction or confusion in the fact that Uncle Melech seems to act in a dual symbolic capacity suggesting to the reader both the Jewish people and the Messiah. A traditional Jewish view, set forth by Maimonides, tends to identify Messiah with the people in a purified state, in what might be termed a Messianic condition. The people contain within themselves the Messiah idea. To this extent and in this way is the miracle naturalized.

Though the naturalizing of the miracle through Uncle Melech is a sound literary device and a not unsound Judaic doctrine, the author is not content with a simply secular explanation of the miracle; rather, he makes explicit the intervention of the divine. Not only does Uncle Melech say, "I bless the Heavenly One for my rescue," but the nephew too, in seeking an explanation of the historical events, the exodus and the return, rejects the theories of a companion on the flight to Tel-Aviv, though intrigued intellectually by them. At the end of their discussion he asks, "And what rôle does Providence play in your scheme? You have forgotten, in your thesis, to place God."¹ And later in his sojournings in Israel the nephew becomes fully convinced of God's part in the redemption of the Jewish people. "And now in Israel," he remarks, "the phenomenon was being made everywhere explicit. The fixed epithet wherewith I might designate Israel's poetry, the poetry of the recaptured time, was now evident. The password was heard everywhere—the miracle! I had found the key image."

¹ The companion, an American journalist, is described as a member of an assimilated Jewish family. Though he is now a Zionist, his background has provided him with a very scant knowledge of Judaism, and his theories are presented in obviously unJudaic terms. The nephew's rejection of these theories is perhaps intended to suggest his rejection of the assimilationist's explanation of Jewish history. If this is so, then the Canadian Jew's rejection of the assimilationist position parallels and completes the European Jew's rejection of Communism and Christianity in his search that leads him back to his own faith.

THIS RELIGIOUS interpretation of events raises a more profound religious question, one that runs through the entire novel and constitutes its central and most moving motif: the question of good and evil, a question which involves the nature of the relation between God and man.

At the beginning of the story, Uncle Melech, the devout Talmudic scholar, appalled by the inexplicable evil acts perpetrated during the Russian pogroms, raised the outcry not infrequently heard in the course of a long history of persecution: "Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper?" But in the past such questioning was less of a challenge to God's authority than an agonized plea for understanding. Uncle Melech, the modern Jew, finding no answer, unable to reconcile the prevalence of evil with belief in an all-loving and omnipotent God, forsook his religion. The act of evil, regarded as an isolated event, was not understood and could not be justified; only if one can see the whole, Klein suggests, can one judge the part. But this full vision, this God's-eye view, is not vouchsafed to man, who nonetheless feels compelled to judge, and in judging, too frequently errs. Because his view is limited or because he is overwhelmed by the immediate tragedy, he fails to see that out of evil can come good, out of death, life. For such an awareness, faith in the rightness of God's acts is essential. The centrality of this theme in the novel is indicated by an extract from John Milton's *Areopagitica* which Klein inserted in the title page of *The Second Scroll*:

And ask a Talmudist what ails the modesty of his marginal Keri that Moses and all the prophets cannot persuade him to pronounce the textual Chetiv.

Milton, in the passage from which this extract is taken, criticizes those who would change words in the oral reading of the Torah in accordance with the Talmudic precept "that all words which in the law are written obscenely, must be changed to more civil words". This injunction, invoked for modesty's sake, angered Milton, as he remarked, "fools, who would teach men to read more decently than God thought fit to write". Klein finds this remark a fitting prelude to his story, saying in effect that those who presume to judge the rightness of God's acts are guilty of folly. He reinforces this theme, the need for accepting God's will, by adding a second prefatory comment in the form of an extract from Rabbi Levi

Yitschak's song in praise of God's all-encompassing love.²

Through meaningful Biblical allusions and symbols in the text of the novel, Klein suggests the reconciliation of good and evil, necessary for the acceptance of God. At the end of chapter Genesis in *The Second Scroll* Klein writes that the great smoke that billowed over the Jews of Europe for the six years following Hitler's invasion of Poland, the smoke of war and from the gas chambers and funeral pyres, became their cloud by day, their pillar of fire by night. This allusion to the instruments by which God guided and protected the Jews while in the desert following the exodus from Egypt, suggests symbolically, in Klein's seemingly ironic use of it, the theme of good out of evil. Again, at the end of Exodus in *The Second Scroll*, immediately after the horrifying description of the massacre at Kamenets, comes the lyric outburst of the note of hope, symbolised by the Israeli ships come to collect the remnant for a new life. The startling juxtaposition of the events and their moods clearly suggests a close relationship, a kinship of good and evil. Uncle Melech at this moment ponders the miracle of redemption, the messianic nature of the events. And he concludes:

When the years were ripened, and the years fulfilled, then was there fashioned
Aught from Naught. Out of the furnace there issued smoke, out of the smoke a
people descended. The desert swirled, the capitals hissed: Sambation raged, but
Sambation was crossed.³

Later in Israel the nephew finds the answer to the question that he put to his companion on the airplane, "And what rôle does Providence play in your scheme? You have forgotten, in your thesis, to place God." The obsessive theme of the discovered poetry is the miraculous, and the key image necessary to explain the remarkable vitality, the rebirth evidenced in every aspect of life, is the miracle. With this increasing awareness, the nephew realized suddenly the significance of his own experience earlier

² Rabbi Levi Yitschak, the Berditchiver Rabbi, one of the most noted of the post-Biblical Rabbis, is famous for his having summoned God to judgment to account for the evil He can prevent but does not. Klein's poem on this subject, "Rabbi Levi Yitschak Talks To God" (in *Hath Not a Jew*), parallels *The Second Scroll* in that in both a religious man challenges the justice of God's acts only to accept ultimately on faith His will.

³ The Sambation is a legendary river beyond which the lost tribes of Israel are to be found.

at the Arch of Titus in Rome.⁴ His sense of humiliation was transformed to triumph and the stone of the Arch disappeared at the moment he recalled his Uncle's words, which express the essence of faith: "When the years were ripened, and the years fulfilled, then was there fashioned Aught from Naught." And the fifth gloss, the final statement in the entire book, restates in exalted tones this theme.

This awareness of the element of the miraculous, of the manifestation of God's will, led the nephew immediately after to an act of piety which, he said, "spoke well for me before the *Rebono Shel Olam* (Master of the Universe)." He went in memory of his mother to Rachel's Tomb to say Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, and there at the nearby synagogue of Rabbi Yitchok Luria, the sixteenth century Jewish mystic, he saw, he tells us, a symbol, an old man, bearded like antiquity, teaching a young boy the Talmud, "forever unaging in the study of Torah, which is Life". The scene and the discussion with the old sage strengthen the nephew's growing conviction of the miraculous nature of the historical events. "They affirmed it for me," he comments, "the young boy prodigy and the old man who looked like Elijah: Israel had not only returned back into Time; it still belonged to eternity."⁵ Here at last he learns of his Uncle's abode, but he fails to see him, since Uncle Melech was just murdered. But with the new conception of evil and death, which is rooted deep in the Jewish religion, he is not overwhelmed by a sense of tragedy. Evil and death are not things in themselves; they have their place in God's scheme and therefore are not to be vilified or unduly lamented. The novel ends with the recital by the nephew of the Kaddish, the mourner's prayer, which, significantly enough, does not even mention death once. It is not a lament, but, on the contrary, a Magnificat, an exalting of God and an acceptance of His ways.

It is not my intention here to get involved in this ancient and continuing question, the dilemma confronting all who seek meaning and purpose in life. Klein's answer in *The Second Scroll* to the question of evil adds nothing new. The objections to his answer, which are also long-standing,

⁴ The Arch of Titus was built in commemorate the victory over the Jews in 70 A.D. by Titus, the destroyer of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple.

⁵ It might be pointed out that according to traditional belief the second coming of Elijah the Prophet will immediately anticipate and accompany the coming of the Messiah.

are not invalidated, but neither do they offer the final word. The problem remains unresolved, for it is essentially unresolvable. One takes up a position, knowing its vulnerability, and orders one's life accordingly. And Klein, in this novel, accepts the traditional Jewish position, an optimistic view which does not regard reason or will as fixed and final, but as a dynamic force capable of expansion to the point where man, by his efforts, aided by Divine Law and the occasional intervention of a loving God, approaches a Messianic condition. Klein's novel is based on this assumption, and so despite the cataloguing of horrors, it ends on an exultant note.

The Second Scroll is then not simply, as some critics suggest, a neo-Zionist novel. Even if one were to regard Zionism as an expression of religious faith and yearning and not merely as an expression of nationalism—for Zionism, historically, was conceived and maintained in a category of holiness—such a view of Klein's intent is too narrow. The novel is concerned fundamentally with religious themes, in that contemporary Jewish history is interpreted in terms of religion as the coming together again of God, the Jewish people and the Holy Land. The events, seen as miraculous, reveal the involvement of God's will. *The Second Scroll*, however, is a religious novel in an even more fundamental and universal sense. The universality of Klein's religious theme is made evident by his indicating the essential oneness of the three major western religions, Judaism, Christianity and Mohammedanism. In the third parable of Gloss David, he insists that it is immaterial whether the agent of the lamp manufacturer (the light creator) is Mahmad or Ibn Amram (Moses) or Ibn Yousuf (Jesus); what matters is the quality of the light itself. And just as the Bible tells not only the history of the Jews, but, more important, recounts the unfolding of man's awareness of God largely through God's revelation of Himself through deeds, so too A. M. Klein here develops as his central theme the drama of man losing and finding God. This religious theme is, of course, in this story inseparable from the national theme, for the miraculous return to Israel is seen as part of God's plan, and is the happy fulfillment that furnishes the optimism basic to a renewed faith that alone enables him to resolve the old dilemma faced by religious thinkers, the problem of evil and its bearing on God's relation to man.

