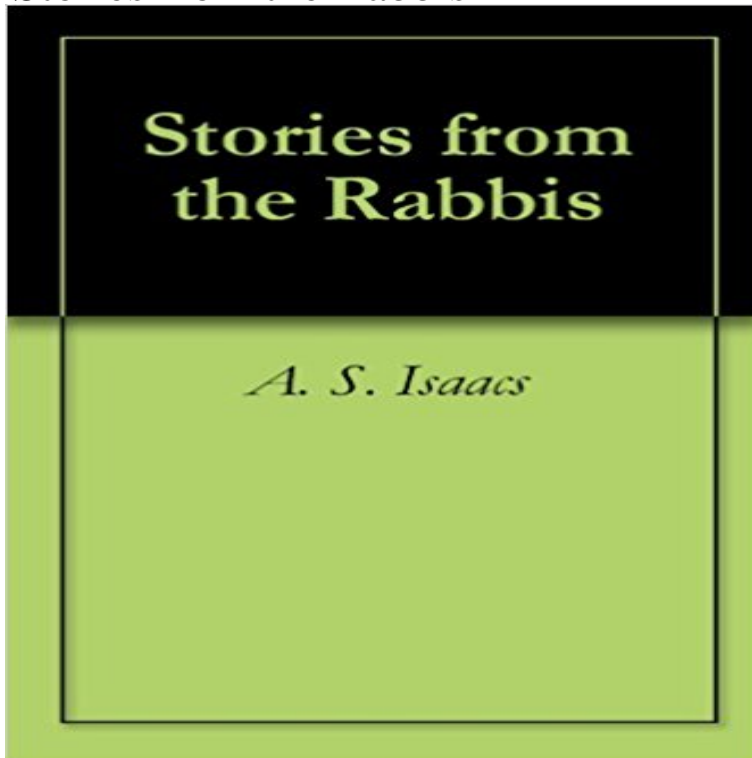


Stories from the Rabbis



This volume is from 1893. The rabbis, whose sayings are recorded in the Talmud and Midrash--writings that stretch over about a thousand years--were admirable story-tellers. They were fond of the parable, the anecdote, the apt illustration, and their legends that have been transmitted to us, all aglow with the light and life of the Orient, possess perennial charm. The common impression that they were rabbinical Dryasdusts---mere dreamers, always buried in wearisome disputations, abstruse pedants dwelling in a solitary world of their own--- is wholly unjust. They were more than ecclesiastics-- they were men; and their cheerful humanity forms the *secretto* their character. Their background was rather sombre--temple and nationality destroyed, a succession of foreign taskmasters, a series of wars and persecutions that would have annihilated any other race. But if the Roman drove his ploughshare over the site of Judaeas capital, the Hebrew spirit refused to submit to the yoke of any conqueror. In the storm and stress of centuries the rabbis preserved, a certain buoyancy and even temper, which sprang from the fulness and sunniness of their faith. They thought and studied and debated; they worked and dreamt and cherished hope. The rich harvest of rabbinical stories that survive can be traced to rabbinical buoyancy. It is a quality not peculiar to the rabbis; it is distinctly Oriental. Nor can absolute originality be claimed for their graceful and suggestive

legends; they are children of various climes, these floating fairy tales, and the history of their migration from land to land, and literature to literature, is an enchanting, perhaps, as the stories themselves. But in Palestine and Babylonia they received a coloring that was essentially rabbinical, and were applied by the rabbis to the circumstances of their day. In their hands they became instruments of instruction that formed the solace and inspiration of the Jews in every clime. The rabbis were preachers par excellence. In the school and synagogue they found the story the best sermon. They taught in parables. The Talmud is by no means merely a digest of conflicting legal opinions; it is rather a literature extending over nearly a thousand years, and embracing views on every branch of every branch of thought by as varied a body of men as ever assembled in such a long parliament of almost ten centuries. It has its mountain peaks, cold, sterile, fog-enwreathed, inaccessible save to the chosen few; but it abounds none the less in lovely meadows, bright with the sunshine of humanity and redolent with familiar flowers, with the blue sky ever near. There are grave disputations by the doctors of the law, profound dialectic harangues, bristling with the logic of the schools, which an ordinary person would not have the presumption to understand; but, happily, there are cheerful anecdotes and sayings that never lose their interest and appeal to a common humanity. The history of the Talmudic era is written in a minor key for the Jew, but the Talmud itself is far from being a lamentation. The rabbis of old

judaea blessed God in seed-time and harvest, in sunshine and rain, in joy and sorrow, and in the flash of the lightning, in the fragrance of the rose. Such was their moral earnestness, so pure and gentle and beautiful their optimism in centuries of continuous chastening, that of them can it be truly said, they found tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in every thing. The Faust of the Talmud--The Wooing of the Princess--The Rip Van Winkle of the Talmud--Rabbinical Romance--The Shepherds Wife--The Repentant Rabbi--The Inheritance--Elijah in the Legends--When Solomon was King--Rabbinical Humor--The Munchausen of the Talmud--The Rabbis Dream--The Gift that Blessed--In the Sweat of thy Brow--A Four-leaved Clover--The Expiation--A String of Pearls

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