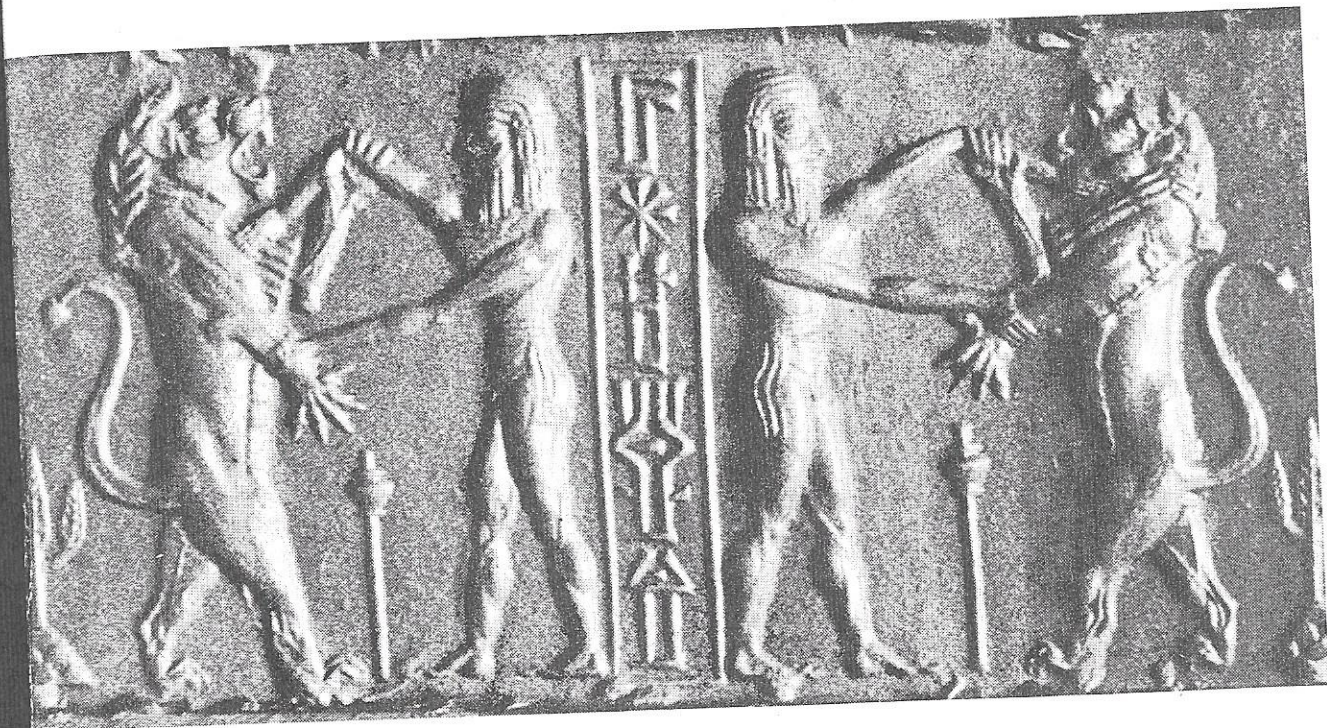


The Gaster Festschrift



**THE JOURNAL
OF THE ANCIENT NEAR
EASTERN SOCIETY OF
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

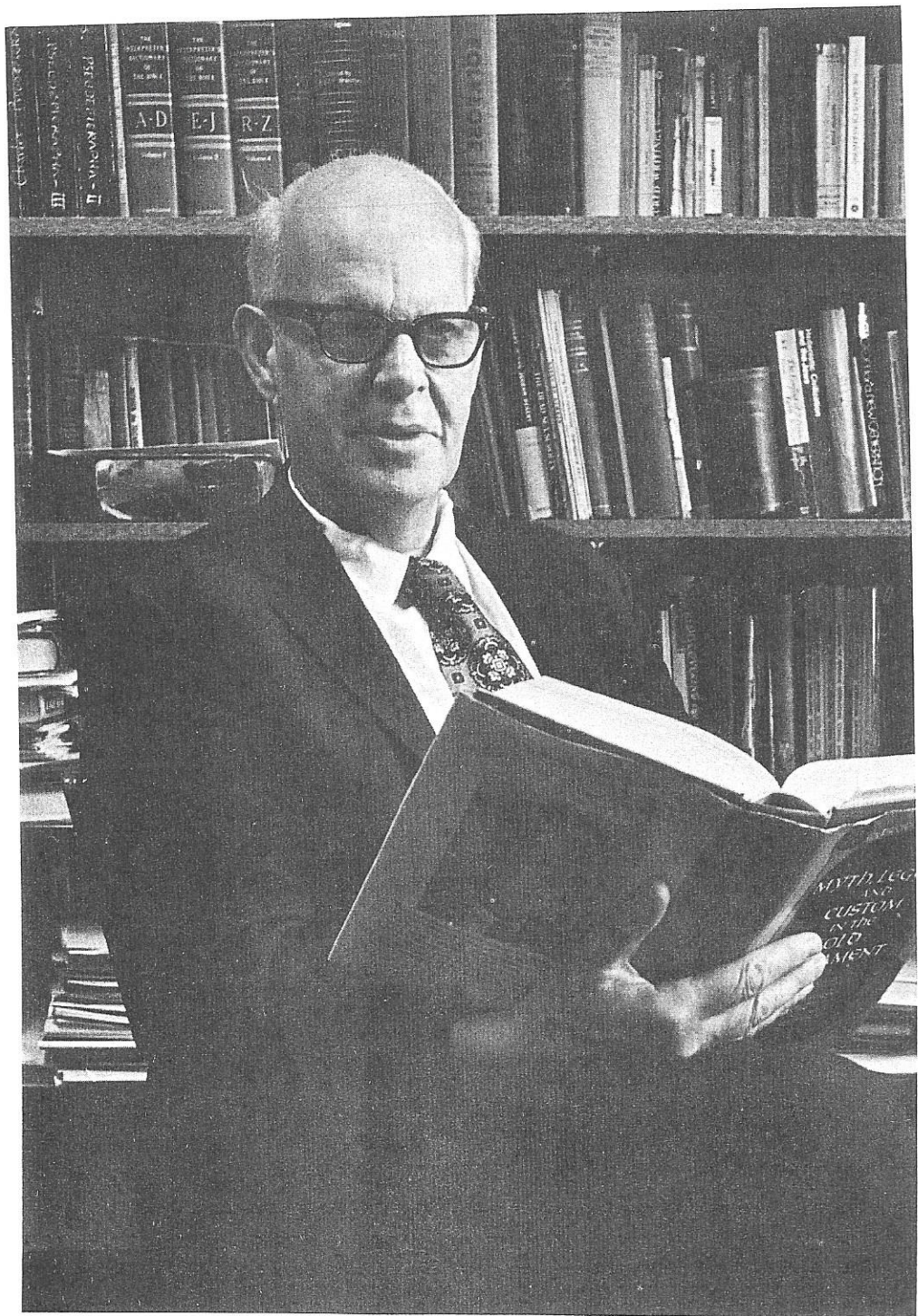
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The Journal
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THE GASTER FESTSCHRIFT

The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society is proud to dedicate this special issue to Professor Theodor Herzl Gaster on the occasion of his retirement from Barnard College and Columbia University.

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PREFACE

Like most *Festschriften* this one has had a long history (almost two and a half years) and is the result of the labors of many dedicated people whose work ought to be acknowledged here.

On the academic side thanks are due to the authors for their contributions, for their prompt meeting of deadlines, and for their long-sufferance in waiting for proofs. Thanks are also due to Chayim Cohen, Yaakov Elman, David B. Freedman, and Leslie R. Freedman for helping our editors with the preparation of the manuscripts at the preliminary stages.

On the technical side we are greatly indebted to the assistance and advice of our design consultant Rick Brightfield who has endured the vagaries of the authors, the complaints of the typesetters, the murmurings of the paste-up artists, and the almost continual pressure from the editor with saintly patience and good humor. We are also extremely grateful to our artist Fred Assa who worked with extraordinary diligence during the frantic weeks that were spent preparing the *Festschrift* for the printer.

To Gertrude McGrath, the Director of the Office of University Publications, we offer our deepest thanks. Since the idea of the *Festschrift* was first formulated she has given us every possible cooperation and encouragement, and allowed us complete freedom to use the premises whenever we wished. Also at the Office of University Publications we would like to acknowledge the work of our copy editors William Alan Bowne, Grace Brickell, and Ethel Hetherington Perina who, in spite of the varied and technical material, strove to give the book a consistency of style.

Since all of the diacritical marks had to be inserted by hand, a special word of thanks must go to the "accent gang" (Ted Baran, Allan Gilbert, Ed Greenstein, Mark Meretzky, and Shari Schlesinger) who labored tirelessly for many long evenings putting in macrons, circumflexes, š signs etc. The "gang" made every effort to ensure that accents were placed in their proper place and that none would go astray.

John Piet took the excellent photograph of Professor Gaster which appears on page ii.

Finally, the production of this *Festschrift* would not have been financially feasible without the generous support of the following: President Martha Peterson and Barnard College; Mrs. Madeline Noveck and the Associated Charitable Foundation; the Louis and Minna Epstein Fund of the American Academy for Jewish Research; Mr. Samuel Lemberg and the Lemberg Foundation; Mr. Harry Starr and the Littauer Foundation.

To all of the above, on behalf of the *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*, I extend my warmest appreciation and gratitude.

David Marcus

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Theodor H. Gaster: An Appreciation

To enter the tellingly book-crammed study of Theodor H. Gaster one must first pass through a small portal, the doorposts of which are graced by two portraits: on the left, Sir James Frazer, on the right Erasmus of Rotterdam. In undertaking the all but impossible task of seeking out and formulating the quintessence of Professor Gaster's unique contribution to a dazzling array of disciplines and fields, one could scarcely have a surer guide than this particular choice of *objets d'art*. For while comparative material of encyclopedic proportions may be said to comprise the body of Professor Gaster's writings, the soul which informs them bears the unmistakable imprint of a humanist. For Gaster, man is the measure by which one gauges the ultimate significance of a given cultural phenomenon, not the canon of some arbitrary value system or scholarly orthodoxy currently in vogue.

When working through the philological explication of some obscure text, composed in any of a variety of languages and dialects, or when puzzling out the import of some gesture or symbolic act preserved in a narrative or ritual text, the twin perspectives of the comparatist and the humanist jointly characterize Professor Gaster's approach to the problems at hand. Far from stopping short after having eruditely amassed cross-cultural parallels to a specific motif, he typically ventures onward to delineate precisely which aspects of the human experience might account for the inclusion of that motif in the literary repertoire of mankind. Indeed, it is this striving for empathy with that which lies behind a given literary product which prompted Professor Gaster's penetrating analysis of myth as a highly functional human institution, rather than as an idle amusement.

Although much misquoted and often misunderstood, Professor Gaster's views on the relationship between myth and ritual, as well as their joint impact upon the development of literary genres and formal elements of style, remain basic to seasonal interpretations of ancient near eastern texts. The structural characteristics of entire genres of ancient near eastern literature are seen by Gaster to reflect the sequence of specific acts designed to promote the renewal of the world's vitality. Yet such observations are not restricted to the broader aspects of literature, or proposed on so large a scale. He also seeks to uncover functional motivation, in terms of human needs and fears, for the most specific ritualistic provision in the most rudely inscribed incantation. These human factors are, in turn, discerned not only in the rich corpus of the classical literatures he has mastered, but also in the generally less accessible folk-tales, belief systems, and customs of primitive peoples. Clearly, the main thrust of Gaster's ongoing efforts may be viewed as offering the option of an ever-expanding panorama in times and areas more characterized by an abundance of narrowly focused telescopes.

For all its quantity and intensity, the message has never been articulated at the expense of the medium. Indeed, anyone who has been treated to Gaster's eloquent and engagingly witty prose, or delighted in the lyrical beauty of his incisive translations, finds himself doubly indebted for form as well as content. Those privileged to hear Professor Gaster's lectures will allow that this modern-day Nestor, like his counterpart of old, is also one "from whose tongue flowed speech sweeter than honey."

The present volume represents the efforts of a group of colleagues and students who wish to help mark a milestone in Professor Gaster's distinguished career. Our gratitude and admiration for that which he has already achieved is only outweighed by the eager anticipation with which we await his further enrichment of our respective disciplines and, indeed, that tradition of humanistic endeavor he so untiringly perpetuates.

M.H.L.