

### Mapu, Abraham

Abraham Mapu (b. 1808, Kaunas, Lithuania; d. 1867, Königsberg, Prussia) was a teacher and Hebrew author who was active in Russia during the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment; Patterson: 13–25). Especially prominent in his body of work are his two historical novels, *The Love of Zion* (*Ahavat Tsiyyon*, 1853) and *The Guilt of Samaria* (*Ashmat Shomron*, 1865–66), which take place during the biblical period and are based on events described in 2 Kgs, Isa, and 2 Chr. As a *maskil*, a follower of the Hebrew Enlightenment, Mapu criticized rabbinic Judaism which gave pride of place to the Talmud and halakhah. In contrast, he saw the Bible as a classical creation par excellence that could educate about the creative powers and intellect of the Jewish people and its vital past. Mapu found that the Bible contained a host of historical precedents and ideological conflicts that were worthy of study and, through literary production and aesthetic distancing, could relate to contemporary controversies. In the spirit of Haskalah values, Mapu sought to return to the language of the Bible and to nurture it as a cultural, aesthetic, and national asset (ibid.: 63–77).

*The Love of Zion*, the first Hebrew novel, was written over the course of twenty-three years. The novel enjoyed unprecedented success and made its creator the most widely read and beloved Hebrew author of his generation (Miron: 56, 76–7). It was published in dozens of editions (Schwartz: 73, n.16) and was translated into Yiddish, Ladino, Arabic, English, French, German, and Russian. The novel is set in the kingdom of Judah during the time of the prophet Isaiah. The events transpire against the background of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, king of Assyria, and the dispute between King Hezekiah, who refused to submit to the siege, and Shebna, the representative of those who wished to surrender to the Assyrian king. Around these facts, Mapu created a love story with an analogous connection to the national narrative. The supporters of Hezekiah include Jedidiah and Joram, the fathers of Amnon and Tamar, the pair of lovers who at the end of the novel are united and whose rights over the lands of Jerusalem are renewed. The actions and

values of these idealized characters represent the moderate Hebrew maskilim (enlighteners) in Russia, who strive to strengthen Jewish society and ensure its cultural flourishing. The supporters of Shebna are their enemies, who wish to do harm to Amnon and Tamar, while at the same time supporting surrender to the Assyrian king and betrayal of their own king.

The plot of the novel *The Guilt of Samaria*, based on Amos 8:14, is set earlier than that of *The Love of Zion*, during the reign of Ahaz, king of Judah, whose poor leadership brought about the decline of his kingdom and provoked plots to overthrow him by the last Israelite kings, Pekah ben Remaliah and Hosea ben Elah. The plot is driven by several intertwined, personal stories, including the story of Uziel, a Judahite warrior forced to flee Jerusalem because of the plotting of Ahaz and his officers. In the course of the novel, Uziel passes through several stages of personal development before he goes out to do battle in the hills of Samaria against the Ephraimites, led by Zichri. His personal victory and ultimate reunion with his wife Miriam are symbolic. This is both a national victory for the Judean kingdom and a religious victory for the true cult. The novel overflows with characters, subplots, intrigues, masquerading, acts of heroism, and love affairs. This density was labelled a literary weakness by most critics of the novel, who compared it unfavorably with its charming predecessor. Nevertheless, Mapu apparently saw the novel as his greatest literary achievement, an in-depth portrait of a symbolic moment of crisis in the nation's history, when the kingdom of Judah was in decline and almost fell into the hands of the representatives of cultural degeneracy, harlotry, and false worship (Miron: 146–67).

Mapu was the first Hebrew author who turned to Hebrew in order to write modern prose. His novels were therefore considered to be ground-breaking in linguistic terms as well as topical. Biblical verses are interspersed throughout his works and his overall rhetorical style is an impressively skilled gesture to the biblical genius. This skill was especially evident because he dismantled the integrative style of the flowery language of the maskilim and incorporated the biblical elements into new and even contrasting contexts (ibid.: 28–36, 167–75). Following Miron, Tovah Cohen also demonstrated how Mapu adapted Biblical Hebrew for modern ideological needs, when he used the depictions of the divine in the Bible specifically for describing the actual landscapes of the land of Israel (Cohen: 110–33).

Mapu's refreshing attitude to Biblical Hebrew demonstrated its flexibility and vitality, and his sophisticated use of Biblical Hebrew to depict the independent lives of the people on the ancestral homeland stirred up considerable nationalistic feeling. The brief description of the surroundings of

the town of Bethlehem at the beginning of chapter four of *The Love of Zion* was etched on the hearts of several generations of readers, while the figures of Amnon and Tamar fired their imagination, since they could see in them an improved version of the diaspora Jew (Miron: 17–20). These depictions would later play a significant role in Zionist thought, as David Ben-Gurion attested in his memoirs: "*The Love of Zion* by Abraham Mapu breathed a living spirit into the pages of the Bible, which I studied diligently and strengthened in me the longing for the land of Israel" (Ben-Gurion: 10).

**Bibliography. Primary:** ■ Mapu, A., *The Complete Writings* (Tel Aviv 1939). [Heb.]

**Secondary:** ■ Ben-Gurion, D., *Memoirs*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv 1971). [Heb.] ■ Cohen, T., *From Dream to Reality* (Ramat-Gan 1982). [Esp. 93–153] [Heb.] ■ Miron, D., *From Romance to the Novel* (Jerusalem 1979). [Heb.] ■ Patterson, D., *Abraham Mapu: The Creator of the Modern Hebrew Novel* (London 1964). ■ Schwartz, Y., *Do You Know the Land Where the Lemon Blooms* (Or Yehuda 2007). [Esp. 29–82] [Heb.]

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*See also* → Enlightenment