

Title: Preachers in the Desert: The Mosaic National Epics of Hayim Nahman Bialik, Ivan Franko, and Jan Kasprowicz

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Abstract:

Within the complex multi-ethnic and multi-confessional environments of fin de siècle Russia and Austria-Hungary, several neo-Romantic national liberation movements – Zionism, Ukrainian nationalism, and Young Poland – developed alongside each other. Although the ideological underpinnings of these movements were expressed primarily through political pamphlets and journalistic forms, the contemporary literature was influenced as well, becoming a powerful vehicle for exposing a wider audience to the central issues of national politics and cultural revival. As one might expect, the Russian central authority saw these movements as a threat to its imperial project, and fought against them by censoring political groups, regulating publishing, and instituting reactionary language policy. On the other hand, their Austro-Hungarian neighbors to the west largely allowed these movements to flourish. As these national liberation movements became more prominent, and began to compete with each other for privileged minority status, their literatures adopted a shared feature: the trope of Moses leading his people out of Egypt. Through this extended allegory and highly aestheticized style, nationally conscious authors were able to subvert imperial policy, especially in cities like Lviv and Odessa (which lay at the imperial periphery and were particularly multilingual and ethnically heterogeneous). Comparing Hayim Nahman Bialik's Hebrew poem 'Metei midbar' (1902), Ivan Franko's Ukrainian epic 'Mojsej' (1905), and Jan Kasprowicz's Polish 'Z motywów biblijnych' (1912), one can observe how the Mosaic theme was adapted from its traditional Biblical form into the service of three distinct cultural and linguistic movements, having in common only the underlying thread of national liberation. Additionally, since most work in contemporary historiography and literary criticism tends to focus on individual nations and languages, this case is remarkable for its unifying quality, which runs counter to the conventional view of acrimonious Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish relations.