

Rabbi's rhymes — with a twist

BY SIMON ROCKER

▶ IT MIGHT not seem unusual for a rabbi to translate the Torah — but it is if he does it in verse.

Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen has just published a new poetic version of Genesis in English, rendered into rhyming couplets.

It is a new departure for the rabbi who has previously written many books on Jewish festivals and prayer as well as articles on the Bible in scholarly journals.

Since he has written on Jewish liturgy, and a major part of the liturgy is poetic, he has long been captivated by poetry as a form of religious expression, he explained.

But the immediate inspiration from the new book came from another source.

"We were on holiday in the Lake District with friends," Rabbi Cohen said. "And we did the Wordsworth trail. I got the muse from immersing myself in Wordsworth for a couple of days — and started to write *Beres-hit* (Genesis) in rhymed verse."

The translation contains a good deal of poetic license — he expands on the original episode with

material inspired by the Midrash and other rabbinic interpretation.

"The Torah doesn't go in for a great deal of motivational character analysis," he said. "I thought there was a lot of scope here for retelling the story à la David Kossif in rhyme, embodying all these other ideas and weaving them into the text itself."

The 230-page book includes 50 pages of notes on his rabbinic sources. "I felt it was important to justify a lot of my poetic imagination," he said. "In sacred literature, one can't just go off at a tangent without explaining where all the ideas come from."



PHOTO: CHARLES GREEN

While poets have tackled biblical episodes before, he was "not aware of anyone who has reproduced — and not from a Jewish rabbinic perspective — a whole book of the Torah in rhymed verse. So I think it is a fairly novel exercise."

The former Stanmore Synagogue minister, who retired five years ago and is currently helping out at Hampstead Garden Suburb Synagogue, has been particularly encouraged by the response he has had from readings of his work.

"I gave a poetry reading in Netanya in aid of Laniado Hospital. Well over 100 people came," he said. "I realised it was something people were enjoying."

Even in translation the Bible can seem daunting, so he has tried to give it a light touch, introducing some of the rabbis' more whimsical ideas — for example, on the problems faced by Noah in feeding the animals in the Ark.

According to the Midrash, he said: "The lion wasn't given his food at the right time so he kicked Noah and maimed him."

For *Genesis in Poetry* see www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk/books

Creation and Adam

Why just now,
indeed, why ever,
Infinity's thread
Did God choose to sever?
Whatever possessed him to empower
Those who would morally cower;
Betraying indifference
To their own existence;
Those who would lie
And deny,
Seek to dethrone
The One blissfully alone -
And rarely, if ever, truly atone?

'I've called you Adam,
I like that name;
Conflicting concepts
It seeks to proclaim:
From *adamah* - the earth below,
Or from *demut*, divinity's glow.
'If you are anchored in physicality,
And have no truck with spirituality,
Then you're *adamah* in reality,
And your life will be a vague vacuity.
'But if your sights are set on high,
And you have faith when others deny;
If your deeds are good and true,
And acts of kindness you accrue,
Then my *demut* you'll share with pride -
And you'll always find me by your side.'