

A DECADE SINCE JACOB LIVER'S UNTIMELY PASSING – A RETROSPECT

by *BINYAMIN UFFENHEIMER**

Ten years have passed since the untimely death of Jacob Liver, one of the founders of the Bible department at Tel-Aviv University, and its chairman until the day of his death. When we eulogized him ten years ago, we were steeped in the shock of the great loss of a close friend who was taken from us in the prime of his life. The decade which has passed created the distance which enables us to see new aspects in his personality and work, and to concentrate our attention on the implications hidden in his work as we continue to pursue our research.

After World War II, Jacob Liver began his studies at the Hebrew University, enrolling in the Bible, Jewish history and general history departments. He began working at the *Encyclopedia Biblica* project in the early nineteen fifties, when the generation of its founders, including Professors Cassuto, Tur-Sinai, Sukenik, B. Mazar and S. Yeivin were laying the foundations of the project. In the span of a few years, he was promoted from the rank of technical assistant to editor. He finally became the chief editor. His personality left a strong imprint on vols. 3-5 of the encyclopedia because of the many articles which he contributed to them as well as his active role in setting the general policies of the project. I feel that the subsequent volumes are slowly showing an additional inclination towards theological problems. Like the majority of present day Israeli Bible scholars, he showed little interest in the theological aspects of biblical research concerning himself instead with historical realia. He was the ideal person for working on this type of encyclopedia since by his

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thought and inclinations Liver was a first class empirical historian. Liver would labour to examine each and every detail to create an entire picture pieced together from the small scraps of information which he saved from oblivion.

This ability is evident from his first article, "Problems Concerning Hiram the King of Tyre" (*Journal of the Israel Exploration Society*, vol. 3, 1953) to his final, posthumously published *Chapters in the History of the Priests and Levites* (Jerusalem, 1968). He aimed at unravelling the geographical, historical and social details of each topic he worked on; Liver devoted himself to analysing the historical and social setting of the genealogical lists in biblical, apocryphal and rabbinic literature.

Already in his first book, *The History of the Davidic Dynasty from the Destruction of the Judean Kingdom until after the Destruction of the Second Temple* (Jerusalem, 1959), which I reviewed then at length in *Kiryat Sefer* [35 (1959), pp. 403-408], it becomes evident that he is interested in facts not only for their own sake, but also, as a farsighted historian, he wanted to portray a phenomenon extending over hundreds of years, concentrating mainly on the relationship between historical reality, beliefs, and doctrines. He shows how messianic hopes were centered around descendants of the Davidic dynasty, beginning with the exiled King Yehoiachin, and terminating with the last of the princes and exilarchs who considered themselves as descendents of King David. In fact, messianism, as it developed from the death of King Josiah in 609 B.C.E. until the end of the Mishnaic period is not an abstract idea which developed because of its own inner logic, but rather was related, sometimes dialectically, to historical reality. In this area, one of the most influential realities of the period was the presence of living descendents of the Davidic dynasty.

The empirical approach is also evident in his last work, *Chapters in the History of the Priests and Levites*, which concerns itself with the development of cultic ritual and organization as well as the position of cultic functionaries. The foci of this issue are the genealogical lists of Levites, priests, singers and gatekeepers in I Chronicles 23-26, and the determination of the time period which they reflect by comparison to Pentateuchal material and the lists in Ezra-Nehemiah. The conclusions are supported by material from rabbinic literature, the Dead Sea scrolls and Josephus. After a minute philological investigation, he establishes that there is no relationship between the genealogical lists of I Chronicles 23-26 and those of Ezra-Nehemiah. However, their relationship to the lists of levitical families in the Pentateuch is highly evident. His conclusion: the lists of Levites in I Chronicles 23-26 stem from the period of the early monarchy when David and Solomon established the cult in Jerusalem. However, modern biblical critics consider the lists of Exodus 6:15-19, Numbers 3, etc. as part of the priestly document. Only because of his mistaken premise that the Levites developed into a special class from the days of Josiah, did Wellhausen argue that the pentateuchal lists were later than Ezra and Nehemiah. If we reject this mistaken premise, nothing can stop us from dating this list from Chronicles to the period of David and Solomon.

The case concerning the lists of priests in I Chronicles 24 is different. It is not a genealogical list, but rather a functional list; it includes 24 divisions of priests known from the rabbinic period. It is probable that this is later than the list of Ezra 2 which enumerates only *four* priestly families. The list in Ezra 2 is probably from the time of David and Solomon, when the cultic responsibilities were still only divided between four priestly families. The list in I Chronicles 24 reflects the development of the 24 "watches" of priests during the Second Commonwealth sometime in the Persian period. Between these groups we must place Nehemiah 10:12 which show that the development from four to twenty-four priestly families was a slow and protracted process, during which the priestly families were continually subdivided. One group retained its old name and a second group was denoted by the name of its father.

If we now add his discussion concerning the singers and gatekeepers, a clear picture of the development of the cultic rituals arises. The same is true for the position and social importance of the cultic vessels, priests and Levites during the First Temple and the return. It is no *a priori* theory, but rather a careful analysis of each and every detail in the texts which enabled Liver to attain these far-reaching conclusions. These cast further doubt on the evolutionary methodology of Wellhausen. In this book, and in other monographs, he showed that the Chronicles preserve reliable historical traditions which expand our knowledge concerning the First and Second Temple period. This is in line with the trend of modern Israeli scholarship pioneered in M.H. Segal's important article on Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah.¹ We may say that Liver's work is a meeting point for the various approaches and tendencies in modern Israeli scholarship. Concerning approaches, I specifically refer to the emphasis on realia, and the synthesis between Bible, historical geography, archeology and epigraphy – and to whatever may be used of Second Temple literature for this purpose. In the wake of Yehezkel Kaufmann, he dates the priestly document to sometime during the First Commonwealth. Accordingly he also predates the split between priests and Levites.² Liver's approach to Chronicles was deeply influenced, as mentioned, by the approach of Segal, who stressed the differences between the historical outlook of the Chronicler, and that of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah. He refuted, therefore, the generally accepted assumption that the books Ezra-Nehemiah belong to the work of the Chronicler. At the same time, Liver insisted on the basic historicity of the special traditions embodied in Chronicles.

His historical and sociological analysis of the priestly document completes contemporary re-evaluations of some basic societal institutions, e.g., community

1. M.H. Segal, "The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Tradition and Criticism* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1957, pp. 186-215 [also appeared in *Tarbiz* 14 (1953), pp. 81-103]. Similarly, B. Uffenheimer, *The Visions of Zechariah* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1961, pp. 172-177 and Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of Chronicles* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1977. However, Kaufmann defended Zunz's assumption that the chronicler also authored Ezra-Nehemiah; see in *The History of the Religion of Israel* (Hebrew), vol. 4, part 1, pp. 453-481, 503-509.

2. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 113-184; Y.M. Grintz, *Studies in Bible* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1979, pp. 13-78; A. Hurvitz, "The Evidence of Language in Dating the Priestly Code," *Revue Biblique* 81 (1974), pp. 24-56.

('edah)³, family⁴, tribe⁵, Sabbath⁶, sabbatical and jubilee years⁷ and various conceptions pertaining to temple ritual.⁸ In this manner he contributed to undermining the scholarly perception, that all these are the imaginative creations of the Pharisaic scribes of the Second Temple period. Accordingly, there were scribes suspected of creating the misleading impression that their legalistic approach was based on ancient tradition.

Liver refuted generalizations and theories which are still widespread in contemporary scholarly circles. One such example is Noth's assumption concerning the existence of an amphictyony in Israel. Liver rejected this assumption because it is not attested to in biblical sources; amphictyonies are the unique creations of ancient Greek society.⁹ A second example of such a theory is Alt's methodology in studying Israelite law, where he gives an historical and social meaning to facts which only imply literary conclusions – namely the distinction between casuistic and apodictic law.

One of his historical essays which combines study of biblical texts, epigraphy and historical geography, is "The Wars of Mesha, King of Moab with Israel," which appeared in a book he edited, *The Military History of Israel in the Biblical Period*, 1964, pp. 221-240. Based on historical-geographical and historical-military analysis of the Mesha inscription as well as the combination of relevant information from the biblical account, he concludes that the events described occurred at the end of Ahab's reign, and only afterwards did the war of Jehoram and his allies, described in II Kings 3 take place. He succeeded brilliantly in portraying these events in an entirely new light due to geographical research in the area combined with investigations into ancient warfare.

However, historical and sociological questions were not his only areas of interest; he also dealt with the difficult source-critical problems of the Pentateuch. In particular, his two articles "Korah, Dathan and Abiram" and "The Stories of the Spies: The Problem of the Penetration into Canaan from the South,"¹⁰ should be mentioned here. He refuted two alternative methods which are relatively simplistic – harmonization, which can only lead to the blurring of the problem, and the classical

3. Y.M. Grintz, "The Covenant with the Gibeonites," *The Origins of Generations* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1969, pp. 278-289.

4. J. Liver, "Family," *Encyclopedia Biblica* (Hebrew), vol. 5, pp. 582-88.

5. J. Liver, *The History of Israel* (Hebrew), vol. 2, pp. 247-55, 357-59; H. Reviv, "Tribe, Organization of Israel's Tribes," *Encyclopedia Biblica*, vol. 8, pp. 494-97.

6. J.H. Tigay, "Sabbath," *Encyclopedia Biblica*, vol. 7, pp. 504-17.

7. See B. Uffenheimer, "Utopia and reality in biblical thought," *Immanuel*, 9 (1979), pp. 5-15.

8. J. Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology*, vol. 1, 1970, pp. 1-43; J. Licht and J. Milgrom, "Sacrifice, Sacrifices," *Encyclopedia Biblica*, vol. 7, pp. 222-251.

9. See above fn. 5.

10. See J. Liver, *Studies in Bible and in the Judean Desert Scrolls* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv, 1972, pp. 9-30, 31-56.

criticism which forces the aesthetic and theological categories of the modern critic on the Bible. He cautiously paved his own path, using the results of tradition-history, which does not demand exaggerated source critical conclusions but still leaves room to consider internal distinctions between sources. In this respect, he followed Cassuto, without however involving himself in apologetics and harmonization. Liver was aware that in these areas it is possible to reconstruct the historical truth only by means of conjecture because of the paucity of sources; therefore he was cautious and moderate while presenting his conclusions. His analysis of the oral traditions imbedded in the biblical stories is tantamount to explaining the growth of biblical literature as a gradual process of combining contradictory trends which found their expression in ancient Israelite civilization. Thus the continual evolution, evidenced in literature, reflects ancient Israel's perpetual attempts to arrive at self-understanding in the changing historical situations.

Summing up, we wish to outline Jacob Liver's place in Israeli scholarship according to three facets:

1. I would like first to emphasize his exemplary mode of utilizing historical geography as an explanation of texts, as can be testified to by his previously mentioned article on the Mesha inscription. We must judiciously endeavour to cultivate this approach in the research of biblical-historical issues such as the conquest and settlement of Israel, the return from exile, and similar problems.

2. A second element in need of further cultivation, also evidenced in his writings, is the relationship between the Bible and the ancient Near East. However, we must carefully define what is implied by this relationship; in the large universities in the United States ancient Near Eastern studies programs have swallowed up biblical teaching and research. Certainly no Israeli university can follow this lead unless it were to ignore the connection of the Bible to the rebirth of Hebrew culture in modern Israel. True, the ancient Near East, archeology and all other cognate studies are important tools for understanding the Bible. But we should be careful to stress the unique character of the Bible as the cornerstone of Jewish culture. Naturally the departments of biblical studies in Israeli universities are included within the framework of Judaic studies. Therefore biblical literature should be taught in the setting of ancient Near Eastern civilization without neglecting its inherent ties with the literature of the Second Temple period. Both literatures are the outgrowth of the perpetual reinterpretation of texts and historical events. Such reinterpretation resulting from continually changing circumstances is known as *Midrash* – or in the words of Joseph Heinemann, the late scholar of classics and *Aggadah*: “creative philology.”¹¹

We must do away with the short-sighted rationalistic bias that midrashic literature is only a fanciful aftermath of the Bible, unworthy of serious study. On the con-

11. J. Heinemann, *The Paths of Aggadah* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1950, pp. 1-12; Idem, “Midrash,” *Encyclopedia Biblica*, vol. 4, pp. 695-701.

trary, we have to consider the seriousness of midrashic playing on words and should appreciate it as the historical continuation of the biblical mode of expression which is also based on word associations. Moreover, one of our major responsibilities which has been neglected by Israeli scholars of this generation is a genuine understanding of the religious uniqueness of the Bible. But again, this cannot be viewed only against the ancient Near Eastern background; it must be evaluated as well as the first link in the development of Judaism. In practice, the European universities follow a similar trend from the Christian perspective when they join Old Testament and New Testament within the setting of theological studies. I am not suggesting that Rabbinic exegesis be imposed uncritically on the Bible; on the contrary, the uniqueness of the Hebrew Bible is made particularly evident, when compared to the world of the Sages and that of Hellenistic Jewish philosophers. This is totally different from the Christian approach which perceives the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament; accordingly it interprets the Hebrew Bible either knowingly or unknowingly from the standpoint of the New Testament. On the other hand, we see the whole Jewish civilization of the Second Temple period as a continuation and commentary on the Hebrew Bible.

Truely, we have already started to follow this way of widening the horizons of Bible study and its research and teaching, when we agreed to include apocrypha and the Dead Sea scrolls within its scope. However, we were inadvertently following the practice which developed in Western universities due to *Christian interests*, since the two units, namely apocrypha in general and apocalypse in particular (as well as the Dead Sea scrolls) are viewed by scholars as the bridge between the Hebrew Bible and Christianity. We must correct this modification of history by elevating literature of the Second Temple and Talmudic periods to the level of importance which is due it historically as the organic continuation of the Bible.

3. Finally, one additional aspect present in Israeli scholarship which must be spread and deepened is the literary-aesthetic one. This aspect does not serve for itself alone; only by utilizing the literary approach can we make the text speak even beyond the historical facts contained within it. Then we will be able to unravel the living message of the Bible, translate and express it in contemporary language.

Within this perspective, we can appreciate Jacob Liver as an outstanding exponent of the critical-historical method in biblical studies; his main concerns were problems pertaining to historical realia.

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