

### CAN MODERN CRITICAL BIBLE SCHOLARSHIP HAVE A JEWISH CHARACTER?

by *MOSHE GREENBERG*

Modern critical Bible scholarship is a creation of Christian Europe; its Jewish embodiment is derivative. However, it appears that Jews who wished to be regarded as critical scholars did not take over all the elements of this scholarship as it developed in Europe, but singled out one for emulation, as essential. Consideration of this transmutation will help us to clarify for ourselves the course we have taken till now.

There are two approaches to Biblical research in Europe (and America), both equally legitimate, both equally scholarly and respected in the academic community; neither negates or excludes the other. A given scholar may by temperament be more inclined towards one of the two, but he is not barred from adopting the other on occasion. There seems to be a consensus that both are needed, and it is due to their concomitance that Bible scholarship has played a role in shaping European culture.

These two approaches coexist in the joint Bible project of the British churches known as *The New English Bible*, whose publication was completed in 1970. One is reflected in the translation of the "Old Testament" (i.e., our Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh*) and in its introduction, the other in the translation of the New Testament

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and its introduction.<sup>1</sup> We shall examine each introduction — its main topics and the spirit that animates it — then compare each with a sample of actual translation.

## I

The introduction to the Old Testament opens with an exposition of the factors that put a distance between us and Scripture: the original text has been lost; the language is full of obscurities; the subject matter is alien to us. Since “it is certain that [the present text] does not always represent what was originally written,” the translator “must often go behind the traditional text to discover the writer’s meaning.”<sup>2</sup> The resources available to the scholar are described: he is portrayed as an expert in ancient languages and literatures while the Bible itself is the arena in which he exercises his expertise, beginning with the establishment of correct readings from the testimony of ancient translations and ending with speculative emendation of the text on the basis of its context and with the help of other Semitic languages and of archeology. Emphasis is placed on the authority of the scholar to add, delete and change in order to obtain his professional goal — the maximum possible approximation to the lost original, that is, a philological-historical goal. In this endeavor to close the gap between ourselves and the lost original, the connecting links — the traditional understanding of Bible, and even the received text itself — serve only as points of departure towards the ideal, and so have in themselves only derivative value. With its focus on the current state of the art, it is not surprising that the introduction ignores the work of predecessors. We are given to feel that this project is a triumph of philological talent, a landmark in the history of a science which, like archeology, strives to restore ruins and recover the pristine shape of antiquity.

To sample the result of this approach, we examined the footnotes to the translation of the Book of Deuteronomy, and compared them with a list of “readings which served as a basis for the translation,” published separately in a quasi-internal publication.<sup>3</sup> In Deuteronomy there are a total of thirty notes with the rubric “or,” giving alternative translations. By contrast, there are eighty-one text emendations. (Here we must observe that the introduction states that every correction of the text more substantial than a change in vocalization will be recorded in the notes,<sup>4</sup> yet fifty-nine emendations involve changes of letters or words,

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1. *The New English Bible*, Oxford and Cambridge, 1970. “Introduction to the Old Testament,” pp. xv-xviii, by G.R.D[river]; “Introduction to the New Testament,” pp. v-viii, by C.H. D[odd].

2. p. xvi.

3. L.H. Brockington, *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament: the readings adopted by the translators of the New English Bible*, Oxford and Cambridge, 1973.

4. Op. cit., p. xvii.

additions, or deletions, and of these only ten are mentioned in the notes; while there are eighteen changes of vowel, and four of these are also recorded).

By taking account of the notes, and referring as well to the “internal” list of readings, one will thus receive the impression that the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy contains a good number of ambiguities, but more than twice as many corrupt passages whose texts may be corrected to a “probable reading” on the basis of the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, the Peshitta, etc. Moreover, despite the statement in the introduction that every correction involving letters or words will be recorded in a note, only ten out of fifty-nine are in fact so noted. The lay reader is “exempted” by the scholar from understanding precisely what is being dished up to him. To paraphrase Prov. 25:2, “It is the glory of scholars to conceal things.” Thus the scholarly expert exercises his prerogative to speak *ex cathedra*.

## II

Let us turn to the introduction to the New Testament. Its main concerns are to depict the difficulty of the translators’ task and the methods they used for deciding among possibilities. With regard to the text, it concludes: “The problem of restoring a form of text as near as possible to the vanished autographs now appears less simple than it did to our predecessors. There is not at the present time any [consensual] critical text . . . nor has the time come . . . to construct such a text, since new material constantly comes to light, and the debate continues.”<sup>5</sup> How, then, did the translators operate? They chose among the existing testimonies, noting in the margins alternative readings worthy of consideration. Knowledge of New Testament Greek has greatly improved since the time of the translations currently in use so that, while the general message of the Scripture has not changed, both greater flexibility and greater exactness than our predecessors imagined has become possible. The problem is to avoid slavish literalness, on the one hand, and paraphrase, on the other; the happy inconsistency of the Authorized (King James) Version is worthy of emulation. The conclusion of the introduction deserves quotation in full:

The translators are as conscious as anyone can be of the limitations and imperfections of their work. No one who has not tried it can know how impossible an art translation is. Only those who have meditated long upon the Greek original are aware of the richness and subtlety of meaning that may lie even within the most apparently simple sentence . . . Yet we may hope that we have been able to convey to our readers something at least of what the New Testament has said to us during these years of work, and trust that under the providence of Almighty God this translation may open the truth of Scriptures to many who have been hindered in their approach to it by barriers of language.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Ibid., NT, p. v.

6. Ibid., NT, p. viii.

We examined the translation of the Gospel According to Luke, whose length is comparable to that of the Book of Deuteronomy. The total number of notes in Luke is eighty, of which twenty-eight bear the rubric "or," that is, alternative possibilities of translation, while two are "literally." The remaining fifty notes all have the rubric "some witnesses read" or the like<sup>7</sup> — that is, alternative readings "worthy of consideration"; there is not a single conjectural emendation of the text. The impression received by the reader is of the multiplicity of meanings of the text and, even more, of uncertainty with regard to the reading, coupled with unwillingness on the part of the scholars to discredit alternative testimonies.

### III

Let us compare these two approaches to the study and translation of the Bible with one another. The former sees Scripture as a field on which to parade expert knowledge. Scripture is damaged wares requiring the treatment of experts to restore it to its pristine wholeness; stress is put on the remove of the present text from its "sources." As is the wont of experts, doubts and the tentative character of the product are concealed from the lay reader. The scholar projects an image of sovereignty; he decides with authority. His work is characterized by disinterested objectivity — the hallmark of academic professionalism. There is not a single expression of positive evaluation of Scripture, since the critical scholar is distinguished by his challenging and rejecting accepted positions. Finally, one is struck by the indifference toward the motivations and apprehensions of those whom the translation is supposed to serve. There is no sign of a sense of responsibility to any community, nor to any tradition other than that of academic scholarship.

The second approach may be described as a mission — to uncover the wealth of meaning in Scripture, Scripture itself being perceived as a trove of secrets whose treasures can be ferretted out only by patient searching. To accomplish this, the scholar has been trained up under public auspices, and is supported by them. The lay reader is the scholar's brother. The scholar labors in order to provide him with information; he divulges his doubts to him, and the tentative nature of his conclusions. As an expert, he must make decisions; but as his reader's brother he sets out alternatives, thus making sure he is aware of the uncertainty surrounding his decisions.

This scholar feels responsible towards the community of his brethren, who are unable to handle the original — which in their eyes enshrines the "truth." He is sensitive to the sacred status of Scripture in the eyes of the public, and he seeks to

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7. "Some witnesses read/add/insert/omit" etc.

uncover the grounds of that esteem in the text. He regards himself as a link in a continuing chain of interpreters of the message of the Bible to his brothers.

His sense of mission and of responsibility to the public imposes upon him modesty: dogmatism and authoritarianism are foreign to him. He recognizes that new data constantly change the contours of his field, and that disagreement about their interpretation continues; this awareness dictates humility.

In *The New English Bible* these two approaches dwell side by side: the former is taken to the Hebrew Bible, the latter to the New Testament. We would not at this time speculate upon the reason for this remarkable difference, when by nature these approaches are not determined by subject. The relevant fact is that European Bible scholarship has historically run on two tracks: the academic-professional, centered upon the scholar and his discipline and motivated by pursuit of renown for the profession and its practitioners; and the Christian track, centered upon the community which reveres the Book, and motivated by a sense of mission to create a bridge of understanding between the venerated text and the community eager for its message — a bridge of insight into the reason why this book has been and remains a source of inspiration, challenge and hope to those who hold fast to it.

In Europe, professional-academic Bible scholarship has been applied to both Testaments, and its results hold an honored place in the halls of learning in the Western world. Christian Bible scholarship has also been applied to the two Testaments, but its results — a source of spiritual sustenance to the Christian religious community — are difficult for us Jews to accommodate.

We have adopted academic scholarship, established chairs and trained up students in it. But where is the seat of Jewish scholarship that is characterized by the qualities we have found in Christian scholarship:

Humility — that is, an openness to the new and the innovative, and to continuing debate that entails modesty and lack of dogmatism;

Respect for the text, expressed in a systematic search for its “truth,” in the universal-human sense as well as the particularistically-Jewish; for the wealth of meanings, past and present, contained in it; and for its art of expression;

Finally, and most important, a sense of responsibility towards a community whose members, the scholar’s brethren, await his disclosure to them of the Scriptural message.

The voice of such a Jewish Bible scholarship is beginning to be heard in the land.

It is incumbent upon us, as members of the profession, first to recognize the right of this voice to be heard, then to encourage its development, and finally to prepare ourselves for the fruitful confrontation between the two approaches to the study of the Bible. Only when Jewish Bible scholarship (possessing the qualities we have listed above) will flourish alongside the professional-academic sort practiced by Jews, only then will Bible scholarship become a factor shaping our culture as it has been in its birthplace abroad.

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