

TRANSLATION

CASSUTO AS A BIBLICAL COMMENTATOR

by

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The scientific work of David Moshe (Umberto) Cassuto bears very significant testimony to the spiritual perplexities that beset the generation of the Hebrew renaissance. For Cassuto was an orthodox Jew who was yet completely steeped in the spiritual problems of the generation, as befitted a scion of the great Sephardi tradition of the middle ages whose forebears sought to understand their Judaism in the light of the spiritual environment of their times. The spiritual being of Cassuto encompassed three worlds: the culture of Israel as manifested in its various epochs; western humanism which embraced the cultures of Greece and Rome and Italian renaissance literature; and the cultures of the ancient orient. His researches covered a wide and variegated field: the history of the Jews of Italy and their literature, Dante and his influence on Hebrew literature, and, above all, study of the Bible and of the ancient orient.¹ His creative work in the last two fields made him world-famous as a research scholar of both the Bible and the ancient orient.

It seems to me that his starting point and the goal of his manifold spiritual activity lay in his intense longing to translate the Bible into the language of our generation: that is, to understand the Bible in the spiritual terms of a Jew of the twentieth century. Consequently his work must be assessed as an effort to pit himself against modern biblical scholarship. He was convinced that this scholarship even in its most liberal discoveries was based upon Christian postulates, without which it was devoid of all basis. Despite this, he was far from treating the matter lightly and denying the valid rights of modern biblical research, which opened the historical dimension widely before us. Hence the seriousness which distinguishes his polemic with Christian scholarship. He did not seek, however, to blaze his unique path by homiletic apologetics but as a philologist seized with the methods of empirical science. As is well known, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*,

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¹ M. Cassuto-Salzman, "Kitvei M. D. Cassuto," *Eretz Israel* 3 (Jerusalem 1953) pp. 5-16.

which flourished during the 19th century, neglected the Bible and commenced research into the later periods of Jewish history, either because it openly flinched at the danger of relativism lurking before all historical research and which in this case could tear down the last citadel of Jewish belief, or for some other reason. In the meantime German Protestant scholarship managed to capture the innermost sanctum of Judaism: the Bible. Jewish scholars who came in the wake had to take up this challenge, culminating in the monumental work of Julius Wellhausen and his school, the major assumptions of which are still dominating Western scholarship. Men like Rabbi David Hoffmann opened the discussion, aiming to restore Bible research into the orbit of Jewish studies from which it had been separated by the current trend. His merit is to have pointed out the shortcomings and fallacies of Wellhausen's theory. But the fascinating splendour of this great opus was too seductive. So practically nobody took heed of Hoffman's booklet: *Die wichtigsten Instanzen gegen die Graf-Wellhausen Hypothese*, 1902-3. True, it was also Hoffman's dogmatic approach, culminating in his very learned commentaries on Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which prevented Christian scholars from taking him seriously. Moreover, his aim of restoring Jewish traditional exegesis to its pristine glory was incompatible with the basic requirement to propound an alternative critical exposition of biblical faith in terms of the modern historical-philological method. So even his persuasive arguments against Wellhausen failed to receive their due attention from his contemporaries.

Cassuto is one of those scholars who adopted a moderate critical approach to the Bible based on modern Semitic philology. He grew out of the so open-minded Jewish-Italian tradition which had reached its last acme in the work of Samuel David Luzzatto who flourished in Padua during the 19th century. In his commentary on the Torah (Pentateuch) and on the Book of Isaiah he developed an exegesis aiming at a synthesis between Jewish tradition and modern philological method. True, the apologetic tendencies of this commentary are undeniable; but this was the first time an orthodox Jewish Bible commentator openly challenged the positions of modern Christian scholars whose basic approach was critical. Another personality by whom the young Cassuto was influenced was his revered teacher and guide, R. Perez Zevi Chajes, who disseminated Torah in Firenze before his elevation to the rabbinate of Vienna. That outstanding scholar bequeathed to Cassuto the critical philological method and his love for the culture of Israel.

The work in which Cassuto first presents his scientific method of biblical research is *La questione della Genesi*, which was published in 1934 many years after he had become renowned as the historian of the Jews of Firenze.² In this book he sought to refute the method which states that the

² Cf. *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento* (Firenze 1918).

Torah is composed of four sources compiled during different eras from the beginning of the sovereign state until the period of restoration after the Babylonian exile. According to this method, it follows that the different stages in the development of Israel's faith until its attainment of pure monotheism are reflected in these sources. Cassuto sought to demolish this structure, founded on evolutionary historicism which captivated minds at the end of the eighteenth century and won its decisive victory in the nineteenth century. He was not satisfied, however, with mere destruction but commenced to erect his own edifice. Although he did not succeed in completing this work, nevertheless his two books on Genesis 1-11³ suffice to enable us to grasp the essentials of his exegetic method.

What are the essential features of this method? It seems to me that it rests upon three fundamental assumptions: the first is of a historio-cultural nature, the second literary, and the third is concerned with the aesthetic aspect of the Bible. We shall examine each assumption separately.

1) According to the first, the historio-cultural assumption, the Bible must be understood in the setting of the cultures of the ancient orient. The first part of Genesis is described in his books as a political rejoinder to Babylonian mythology. It would appear from them that the foundation for the edifice of biblical monotheism was taken from the ruins of the pagan culture of Mesopotamia, from where the Hebrew Patriarchs were descended. The creators of the Bible were acquainted with pagan culture and even borrowed from it basic imagery. However, they did not merely copy and imitate: the motifs borrowed were reshaped and adapted to monotheistic culture, which is an unparalleled novelty in the ancient world. The very points of contact between the Bible and the cultures of the ancient orient strongly emphasize the vast chasm separating mythological polytheism from monotheism. A generation ago, Hermann Cohen drew attention to the essential qualitative differences between these two worlds,⁴ and Yehezkel Kaufmann⁵ gave this view an empirical historical basis. Cassuto, however, was not satisfied to demonstrate these facts, because he knew that in the consciousness of a whole nation there are no adventurous leaps, but that the new grows out of a continuous struggle with the old by engulfing and assimilating it. He therefore sought the intermediate links leading from the polytheism of Babylon and Canaan to the monotheism of Genesis and the other books of the Pen-

³ U. Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah*, Magnes Press, 1972; idem, *From Noah to Abraham*, Magnes Press, 1974. Both translated by I. Abrahams.

⁴ cf. *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, Frankfurt a/Main, 1929.

⁵ Y. Kaufmann, *Toledot Ha-emunah ha-yisre'elit I-VIII*, 1937-1956. English translation: *The Religion of Israel; from the beginning to the Babylonian Exile*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg, University of Chicago Press, 1960 (Schocken Paperbacks, 1973).

tateuch. Hence his ardent and profound study of the remnants of the culture of Canaan on the one hand, and of popular Israelite epic on the other. His many studies on Ugaritic writings which were first published as separate articles⁶ are important in their own right and a valuable contribution to lifting the veil from Canaanite culture with which the Bible fought so much. In important monographs he draws attention to the influence of the many aspects of Ugaritic literature on the Bible.⁷ Of special significance are his original articles in this field: *Biblical and Canaanite Literature; Parallel Words in Hebrew and Ugaritic*. During the past thirty years Ugaritic studies have followed the trail he blazed in these articles, and also added greatly to our knowledge. Now it becomes more and more evident that the rich literary heritage of the peoples of Canaan was the cultural background of many biblical writers. The Bible is not an original creation which came into being as a social vacuum, as was still thought to be the case in the eighteenth century, but it is the ripest fruit of a highly advanced civilisation which developed in the ancient east hundreds of years previously. With instruments taken from this culture, the Bible expressed its revolutionary ideas which invert the order of things. The importance of Cassuto's studies is not limited to Semitic philology and biblical research. His profound humanistic scholarship enabled him to detect the manifest and obscure connections leading from ancient Canaanite mythology to the world of the Greek myth. His many scientific notes on this theme scattered throughout his Ugaritic studies are also of great interest to the student of classical philology and the religion of Greece. Above all, these studies are of decisive importance for understanding the Bible. He let no opportunity pass to use these Canaanite texts to explain obscurities in the Bible and to illuminate its literary usages. In his book *The Goddess Anath*,⁸ which is the peak of his creativity in this field, Cassuto dealt with the close connection between biblical poetry and the literary heritage of the peoples of Canaan. In his translation of ancient Canaanite epics into the language of biblical poetry Cassuto raised himself to the rank of an artist and poet. This is the difference between the method of Cassuto and that of H. L. Ginsberg who had translated the Ugaritic writings into Hebrew in 1936.⁹ The strict scientific prosaic style of that important translation caused it to become known to a limited circle of specialists alone, whereas Cassuto's poetic translation is part of vital Hebrew literature and is very widespread amongst intellectuals and young people. Here modern Hebrew literature found the authentic answer to one of the problems

⁶ Now cf. "Biblical and Canaanite Literature", Magnes Press (Jerusalem, 1972), pp.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 20-54, 55-61.

[219-278.]

⁸ *Ha-Elah Anat*, Canaanite mythological epics from the age of the Patriarchs, arranged and translated from Ugaritic to Hebrew, with commentary and introduction by M. D. Cassuto, Mosad Bialik etc., Jerusalem, 1951. English translation: *The Goddess Anath*, Je-

⁹ H. L. Ginsberg, *Kitvei Ugarit*, Jerusalem, 1936.

[Jerusalem, 1970.]

which had occupied the minds of writers and poets from the Enlightenment in the 19th century to the present day. I refer to the erotic fervour where-with some modern Hebrew poets expressed their longing for the culture of Canaan and its ancient idols. This yearning which had been aroused in part by Heine was usually accompanied by manifest anti-religious consequences, since those writers wanted to free themselves from the bonds of historic Judaism by means of the natural freedom which they thought to find in that ancient Canaanite culture. The outstanding representatives of this trend were Shaul Tchernichovsky and Zalman Shneur, whose influence on modern Hebrew literature was pointed out several years ago by B. Kurzweil.¹⁰

Cassuto's translation shed light on the true nature of the culture of Canaan. All at once the romantic veil through which modern Hebrew literature viewed Canaan in the visions of its youth was torn asunder. Ancient Canaanite myth appeared divested of any idyllic view and was found to be so primitive that it discouraged young poets and was no longer able to stimulate romantic thoughts. It would appear that thanks to Cassuto nascent Hebrew literature became sober, viewing the culture of Canaan realistically, and it was clear to it that there was no possibility of returning to those ideals concealed in the sensual mythology of the peoples of Canaan. Simultaneously with the descent of the Canaanite world as an ideal came its renewed ascent as a subject for research. Cassuto presented the student of religion and the student of the Bible with very valuable material whereby it was possible to comprehend tangibly the spiritual processes and the transition stages leading from Canaan to biblical monotheism.

In the wake of the discerning discovery of Gunkel,¹¹ who was the first to perceive remnants of popular creation mythology in the books of the prophets and the hagiographa, as well as in the apocryphal writings, Cassuto too investigated these testimonies. He collected the scattered material of Epic Hebrew Poetry as he termed this myth and reconstructed it with diligence and great skill.¹² It then became clear that the direct source of this myth was not in the literature of Babylon, as Gunkel had thought in his time, but that it was the Canaanite prototype, embodied in the Ugaritic writings, which directly influenced Israel. Most of the mythological fancies have their parallels in Ugarit not in Babylon. By examining this comparable material it was clear to the student of religion that Israelite epic poetry characterises that stage of biblical monotheism in which creation is conceived of in anthropomorphic language, whereas the chapter of Genesis which apprehends

¹⁰ B. Kurzweil, "The New 'Canaanites' in Israel - an analysis", *Judaism*, a quarterly journal, Vol. II, 1, January 1953, pp. 3-15.

¹¹ v. H. Gunkel, "Schöpfung und Chaos," in: *Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen 1895), pp. 29-114.

¹² v. "Shirat ha-Alilah Be-Yisrael," in: *Keneset* 8 (1944), pp. 121-142. Now cf. *Biblical and Canaanite Literatures*, 1972, pp. 62-90 (The Israelite Epic).

the absolute transcendence of God strives for a more abstract conception of creation by rationalising the mythological foundation which has become fossilised into linguistic archaisms devoid of their vitality.

2) Cassuto's second postulate is of a literary nature. After rejecting the source theory, he sought another method to explain the growth of the Torah. As an antithesis, he developed the theory of oral traditions: in his opinion the written sources were preceded by a lengthy period of oral tradition. As with other peoples, the first form of our ancient tradition was poetic, and was handed down from mouth to mouth. The prose formulation preserved in the stories of the Pentateuch, however, is a literary consolidation in writing, the work of relatively later generations. The final editing of the Torah occurred in the time of David. Although the previous poetic tradition has been lost and no longer exists, yet remnants of it have been preserved in a number of poetic verses interwoven here and there in the woof of the pentateuch narratives; these are inexplicable unless it be assumed that the Pentateuch is evoking associations of that first poetic edition or tradition which has been irretrievably lost (Gen. 7: 11, 8: 2; Ex. 9: 23, 12:20, *et al.*).

Pertinent contradictions between various accounts are explicable, in his view, by the Pentateuch's propensity to present the reader with the traditions in their entirety and in all their nuances. Furthermore, as a result of Cassuto's grasp of the point of contact between ancient oriental mythological epic on the one hand and Israelite aggadic tradition on the other, as preserved in the literature of the sages, he succeeded time and again in resuscitating also fragments of those ancient Israelite traditions which had been rejected by the editors of the Bible.¹³ In other cases he traces those lost traditions, showing that at times the Bible presents forgotten mythological imagery (e. g. Gen. 2: 8, the tree of life, good and evil; *ib.* 3: 24, the whirling and flashing sword), or events without giving details, on the assumption that they are known to the reader (e. g. Ex. 18: 2, the sending away of Zipporah). By these methods Cassuto enlarged the common Israelite canvas in which the Pentateuch sprang up.

Wherein lie the main differences between the theory of oral traditions and the theory of sources? As has been said, Cassuto explains the emergence of the Pentateuch without recourse to evolutionary historic construction. Such an approach was common to the proponents of the source theory. They explain both the stylistic differences in the Pentateuch and those concerning the presentation of facts and attitudes by reference to the estimated age wherein each separate source was compiled and by the literary usages of the different authors. Differences in the nuances of the traditions embed-

¹³ For instance: the tradition of the sages on leviathan, in b. *Baba Batra* 74b, or the words of the midrash on the rod of Moses (cf. Ex. R. 8:2 to Ex. 4:20) which reflect a tradition that the rod was the rod of God.

ded in the Pentateuch are, according to Cassuto, due to social strata and not to different historical eras. Let me demonstrate the difference between the two theories through their different explorations of the first chapters of the Pentateuch. According to the source theory the first chapter of Genesis belongs to the late priestly source, since it reflects a sober theological attitude, whereas chapters two and three, written in the spirit of popular *aggadah*, have their source in a much earlier era as they express the ancient primitive stage of Israelite belief. Cassuto rejects this theory and ascribes the differences in the chapters to different social strata; chapter one emanated from intellectual circles who were influenced by external wisdom and whose minds were open to speculative problems, whereas chapters two to three record traditions current amongst ordinary people. The Pentateuch intertwines the two traditions which complement and explain each other, converting them into a single and homogenous literary unit. Inherent herein is the second manner in which it differs from the source theory. According to the latter the compilation of the books of the Pentateuch was more or less a matter of chance, whereas Cassuto stresses the literary unity of the Pentateuch. Though indeed different traditions are embedded therein, their literary formulations and editing are not a matter of chance. A directing hand is recognisable which gives these books an internal unity. Conspicuous stylistic differences between the various layers of the story are explicable, in his opinion, through differences in the subject matters and the topics and not through the literary usages of different writers.

3) The third assumption of his biblical work is its aesthetic aspect, and hinges on the language of the Bible. Gentile scholars approached the language of the Bible in accordance with the theories of classical philology which are perhaps becoming for a dead classical language, whereas Cassuto was sensitive to the vitality of the biblical tongue. He knew how to pay heed to the rhythm of biblical language and to its artistic subtleties. As an author with a refined taste his mind was alive to the unique features of this language, but he did not deal with the aesthetic consideration subjectively. The artistic media upon which the biblical narrative is based, like the use of the *leitwort* or *leitmotif*, or the pretended impersonal objectivity of biblical writers, were designed to intimate the educative and didactic aim of the Pentateuch. At this point it should be noted that at one and the same time there arose four outstanding Jewish scholars who freed the exegesis of the Bible from the schematic rigidity which impaired Western research. These scholars are Cassuto, Benno Jacob – who was also an exegete of Genesis – Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. Each of them revealed in his own way the vitality of biblical language. All four agreed that research into the artistic structure of the Bible was one way of penetrating into the meaning of the writings. They taught that the basic feature of biblical style is associative, based upon the principle of repetition and parallelism, the use of the leading

word (Buber – Rosenzweig's *Leitwort*) being the refined culmination of this principle. The distinctive feature of Cassuto in this group of scholars is his historical approach to the aesthetic problem too. Buber and Rosenzweig explained the element of association psychologically, because they assumed that this literature was designed primarily for the ear, not the eye, seeing that it was chiefly given orally. Cassuto agrees with them in respect of all the biblical prose, whereas, in his view, the poetic literature preserved archaic literary usages whose beginnings are inherent in the culture of Canaan.

These, in brief, are the three assumptions upon which Cassuto's exegetical work is based. To be sure, many queries arise which are partially bound up with the fragmentary nature of this work. Cassuto himself admitted that he had not the time to deal with the legal sections of the Bible with the same thoroughness as he treated the narrative. Some critics stressed that precisely there the differences between the various sections are explicable on the assumption that they were already formulated and constant in their final form when included in the Pentateuch, and did not enter into that unifying melting pot in which, according to Cassuto, the literary tradition was moulded. The same applies to the parallel genealogical lists (e. g. Gen. 4, 5), whose differences are inexplicable save on the assumption that they were included in the Pentateuch after their text had already become stereotyped.¹⁴ They argue further that there are groups of narratives where the differences are well recognised, e. g. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, 3, and only a harmonising homiletic exegesis is able to bridge these differences. Another argument is that the division between the Pentateuch and epic poetry is not absolute, as described by Cassuto, but in the light of the mythological fragments concealed in the Pentateuch it may be assumed that the boundaries were less well defined and the transition from one literary form to the other was amorphous and unsettled. They also express their amazement at the fact that it is precisely in the wisdom literature that the material of mythological epic poetry is found, whereas Cassuto regarded the authors of this literature as responsible for the rationalisation and demythologisation of the tradition as is reflected in Genesis 1. Other critics acknowledged the importance of the theory of traditions to clarify the origin of the Pentateuch but averred that this theory is not necessarily opposed to the theory of sources. It could well be that the two theories complement one another.

It is not my intention here to enter in more detail into this controversy, but the following must be said. Researches in our generation in the field of biblical law, such as those of Julius Lewy or J. J. Finkelstein,¹⁵

¹⁴ cf. Kaufmann's review article reprinted in his book, *Mikivshonah shel Ha-Yigerah Ha-Miqrait* (1966), pp. 216-239.

¹⁵ J. Lewy, "The Biblical Institution of Deror in the Light of Akkadian Documents", in: *Eretz Israel V* (1958; Mazai Jubilee Volume – English section), pp. 21-31; J. J. Fin-

have demonstrated the antiquity of the laws of the priestly source, regarded by classical biblical criticism as a creation of the Second Temple. The same conclusion is being reached in isolated linguistic researches.¹⁶ Kaufmann already insisted forty years ago on the antiquity of the priestly source.¹⁷ Today the investigations into the cultures of the ancient orient confirm his assumption. From this it follows that even if the source theory be accepted generally it lends no support to Wellhausen's theory, which rests upon an evolutionary approach. It must further be stressed that one of the differences between the legal sections of the Pentateuch and those of the ancient orient lies in their variant literary genres: there the legal sections are edited by professionals with the pedantry of jurists, whereas the legal sections of the Pentateuch are part and parcel either of the narrative sections or of the admonitory and moralising passages. It is impossible to separate completely between the legal and the narrative segments. It is precisely this characteristic that brings them qualitatively close to the oral tradition about which Cassuto spoke. However, the problem is not a simple one, as it is possible that these traditions were consolidated in sources that were scattered throughout different collections before being combined together in a book. Anyhow, Cassuto, Rosenzweig and Buber showed that in the legal sections too the principle of repetition, as known from the narrative, dominates.

To conclude, I should like to draw attention to a theological problem arising from reflection on this work: we are presented with a historio-philological attempt to prove the unity of the Pentateuch and to explain its origin by the method of scientific empiricism. Cassuto never spoke to his pupils, nor did he ever write, about the theological implications of this approach. It is clear, however, that the problem of revelation comes to the surface in its most acute form, since historio-empirical research is inclined to dispossess revelation of its transcendentalism and make it subject to constant human endeavour, explicable in terms of sociology and philosophical anthropology. To clarify this problem I shall cite part of a letter written by Rosenzweig to Rabbi Rosenheim. In dealing with the theoretical difference between his and Buber's translation of the Bible and that of S. R. Hirsch, he writes:

"We too translate the Bible as the unique book. We too regard it as the creation of a single spirit. We do not know the name of its creator. It is impossible for us to believe it was Moses. We refer to him by the capital letter R, accepted in critical science to indicate

kelstein, "Some New Misharum Material and the Implication", in: *Studies in Honour of Benno Landsberger*, ed. Gütenback-Jacobson (Chicago 1965), pp. 233-246.

¹⁶ E. A. Speiser, "Leviticus and the Critics", in: *Kaufmann Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem 1961), pp. 29-45.

¹⁷ Kaufmann, *Toledot ha-Emunah ha-Yisre'elit* (1937), pp. 61-80.

the assumed final Redactor. We, however, do not interpret it as referring to 'Redactor' but to 'Rabbenu' (our teacher). For whoever he was, and whatever the sources available to him, he is our teacher and his teachings are ours."¹⁸

I do not know whether Cassuto would have been prepared to agree with this extreme formulation, but in principle he stands on the same plane as Rosenzweig. For throughout his treatment of the biblical world he stays inside the historio-philological sphere. He knew that the transcendental basis of the Bible could not be restored to it by the homiletic theory, because historical consciousness had closed this way to us. It would appear he believed that the present generation was fitted to value the eternal principles latent in the Bible only if it steeped itself in its transient historical modes of expression, and only if its ear was attentive to its unique tones. No theoretical answer to the theological problem can be extracted from his work. Much indeed may be learnt from his spiritual openness and from his intellectual alertness. His importance lies not in the presentation of a solution – it is possible that such a solution is non-existent in the intellectual sphere – but in pointing the way to it. The inner freedom and intellectual integrity with which he tackled these problems are among his outstanding characteristics as a scholar and teacher. The pursuit of these qualities is the spiritual testament he left us, the second generation of Bible teachers in Israel.

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¹⁸ F. Rosenzweig, *Briefe*, Berlin, 1935, p. 582.