

BOOK REVIEW

JEWISH STUDIES AT BEN GURION UNIVERSITY, BEERSHEVA

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אשל באר-שבע; פרקים במחשבה היהודית לדורותיה. א. בעריכת ראובן בונפיל, יעקב בלידשטיין, יוסף שלמון. באר שבע, אוניברסיטת בן-גוריון בנגב החוג למחשבת ישראל, בהוצאת רובין מס, ירושלים, תשל"ז, 438 ע'.

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“There is an indissoluble relationship between knowledge and belief in Judaism. Study is a sacred duty. Hence Judaism knows no conflict between faith and knowledge”. These statements made by Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen at the World Congress for Religious Progress in 1910 may serve as an introduction to our review of the first volume of a series which promises to be important, not only for the research of Jewish thought in general, but even for the Christian view of Judaism in particular. Starting from the earliest Christian times, confrontation between faith and reason, between revealed truth and human science, has accompanied all the phases of development of Christian thought, opposing spirits and creating painful controversies. Not less than five papers of the thirteen included in the present volume show how similar problems have occurred in the even longer history of Jewish thought. Cases like that of Philo of Alexandria in the first century of the Christian era and of Maimonides in the twelfth are well known. But not so much those of Jewish philosophers of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance period.

Colette Sirat, *The Mar'ot Elohim of Hanokh b. Solomon al-Constantini* (pp. 120-199), publishes here for the first time a Hebrew text till now only known in manuscript, preceeding it with a study of al-Constantini's thought. Although she proves that there is nothing really original in this fourteenth century Jewish philosopher from Provence, she also states that in many cases he is far from following such glorious predecessors like Maimonides and shows heavy Christian influence as well.

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His general line in metaphysics is illustrated by the fact that, whenever his endeavours to find a way of reconciliation between faith and reason fail, he chooses faith, as the only alternative to rescue the prophetic inerrancy of the Biblical text.

A thorough study of the Jewish philosophy of the Renaissance period in Italy is the context in which Robert Bonfil presents his paper on *The Doctrine of the Human Soul and its Holiness in the Thought of R. Obadiah Sforno* (pp. 200-257), in which he also publishes four Hebrew (and partly Latin) texts of that fifteenth century thinker. An interesting synoptic presentation of the fourth text with parallel passages from the writings of Thomas Aquinas illustrates the intimate relation of interests and common lines of thought between Christian scholastics and later Jewish philosophers. We should not forget (what Bonfil does not stress here) that there exist many Hebrew translations of Christian medieval philosophers carried out by Italian Renaissance Jews, a few of them have been published (like Boethius' *De consolatione Philosophiae*, parts of *De anima* of Thomas Aquinas, and the whole *Summa contra gentiles*), but most of them are extant only in ancient manuscripts (e.g. writings of Albert the Great, Occam, Gilles of Rome, Petrus Hispanus and Ramon Llull). Bonfil rather stresses the Jewish heritage in the work of R. Sforno, who, in a scholastic-like form reaffirms much of what had already been said by former Jewish philosophers (particularly those influenced by Neoplatonism) about the doctrine of the human soul as *imago Dei*.

Two other analyses, by Gedaliah Nigal and Brakhah Zak, respectively, study *The opinion of R. Joseph Yawetz on Philosophy and Philosophers, Torah and Commandments* (pp. 258-287) and *R. Solomon Alkabetz' Attitude Towards Philosophic Studies* (pp. 288-306). R. Yawetz, who died in Italy only thirteen years after his expulsion from Spain in 1492, is a good example of the eternal confrontation between faith and reason, and of the position normally taken by ancient Jewish thinkers. Despite his knowledge of philosophical solutions to metaphysical problems, Yawetz denies any profit to studying and making philosophy, as this leads, in his mind, to the weakening of faith and contempt for the Torah and God's commandments, the only source of benefit for man. A similar negative attitude to philosophy is taken by Alkabetz, a sixteenth century cabbalist from Safed, who regards the Torah as the only way of reaching God. Yet his vocabulary (which includes such terms as *separate intellects, form and matter*, etc.) betrays a good knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy, which he apparently drew from the writings of his medieval Jewish predecessors.

Rather in the same line of research but with a distinct character because of the different historical context is the outstanding study entitled *The Rationalistic Masking of Irrational Thought in Philo* by Yehoshua Amir (pp. 68-77), who for years has occupied himself with the Alexandrian philosopher. What Amir wants to point out with his title is that, despite the fact that Philo never betrayed his biblical faith in a transcendent God (the *irrational*), he nevertheless often presented his doctrines in a terminology taken from philosophic systems, what sometimes can be confusing. By *rational* Amir means concepts that Philo borrowed from the Platon-

ics and the Stoics, when he uses, for instance, such terms as “the intellectual world” (i.e. the Platonic *ideas*) for the degree of understanding that was reached by priests and prophets, or when he speaks of “the first cause of all action”, an expression which corresponds to the Stoic definition of God (p. 71).

Two important articles, in this book, directly deal with Biblical subjects. One is by Alexander Rofé, *The Betrothal of Rebecca (Genesis 24)* (pp. 42-67). The author tries to find an answer to the various questions put to the historico-literary researcher by the story of Rebecca’s *fiancailles*. The answer involves a revision of the whole method of Pentateuch criticism. After an exhaustive study Rofé reaches the conclusion that there are too many indications (literary, philologic, historic, juridic) against an early dating of the story’s redaction. Thus, unlike earlier critics, even of modern times, who generally assign the story to the work of the so-called J source and date it to the ninth century B.C.E., Rofé argues for a post-Exilic redactor who probably wrote it during the Persian period. As for its purpose and character, Rebecca’s story could fall into the category of the Medieval *exemplum*, i.e. a legendary-historic fact that is intended to exemplify a doctrine or a preached *praxis*. From the juridical point of view, the *praxis* reflected in the story of Gen. 24 is not that which was usual during the First Temple period, but that which was set down much later by the Jewish *Halakhah* (see TJ *Ketuvot*, Ch. 8, TB *ibid.* 72b) and which certainly had its origins in the Persian period, as a result of a continuous and immediate contact of Judaism with Mesopotamian laws and *praxis* (see Tobit 7, 11-14). If Rofé’s conclusions are right, we have here an important step in the progress of the literary criticism of the Bible, an approach to the source research which could bear fruit in clarifying many other passages as well. Similar criteria, it must be recognised, have been happily applied for a long time to the literary criticism of the New Testament, and it is time that Old Testament scholars be more aware of the fact that later *halakhic* *praxis* may have influenced, if not caused, the composition of some of the “ancient”, historic-like narratives.

Further in the line of biblical research is the long article by Moshe Greenberg which opens this collection. Its subject, *The Refinement of the Concept of Worship in the Bible* (pp. 9-41), places us in the well-known field of conceptual evolution in the long history of the Israelite religion. Prof. Greenberg analyses the central idea of worship in its two more traditional aspects of sacrifice and prayer, with an emphasis on the comparison with the Near Eastern setting in which Israel was found. It must be confessed that there is not much new in this study, and that it is rather incomplete. Yet some important, differential details have to be recorded here, like the prophetic stress on the intention of worship; psalmists’ sensitive call for purity in the praise of God; criticism of the intention of sacrifices when primarily directed to the performance of God’s will; prayer formulas intended to help the man to pray, not to be used as magic means; the relation between prayer and vow, and so on. In vain, however, will the reader look for a word of explanation for the conceptual evolution of other not less important items such as the value of community prayer, the relationship between worship and festivals, the meaning of some expressions of prayer as “to seek God’s face”, and others. The Christian

reader, moreover, would like to find a word about the possible evolution in the Biblical concept of worship as affected by the destruction of the First Temple or the profanation of the Second. Certainly, there is no doubt that Prof. Greenberg's study stimulates further research in the direction he has taken. He, for instance, has pushed his comparative study up to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Still, the same must be done with the Apocryphal literature, the Hellenistic Jewish writings and even the Rabbinic tradition in order to obtain a complete picture.

In an effort to find the existing link, sometimes denied, between Rabbinic *Halakhah* and Biblical religious usages, Gerald J. Blidstein analyses the subject of *The First Fruit Offering in Rabbinic Law* (pp. 78-87). His conclusions are positive: despite the apparent discrepancy between the character of the Biblical institution as codified in Deut. 26:1-11 and the *Halakhic* corpus, the final idea which underlies the written and the oral Law is just the same. Many details, indeed, of the Rabbinic texts show the concept "according to which a man bears his first-fruit to Jerusalem, offering it in a festive celebration in which he acknowledges his settlement (התנהלות) in the Land that God promised to give to his fathers and to him, in whom all the generations are represented" (p. 87).

In the next article, Lea Rot Gerson takes a new look at the expression "*God-Fearers*" in *Jewish Inscriptions from Sardis* (pp. 88-93), to reaffirm that the term *θεοσεβής* as applied to the people who performed a vote in the Sardis synagogue does not relate to their personal piety but to their status of "pagan friends of Israel". There is nothing against this view. However, one could object to the main proof adduced by the author for her interpretation, namely that no other synagogue inscription ever honours the donors with a word of praise for their piety, for today we have undoubtful instances of the contrary. The text found in the mosaic pavement of the synagogue at Khirbet Susia, which Prof. S. Safrai discussed in this same journal some years ago¹, opens with the words "May be remembered for good the saintly master teacher (קדושת מרי ירבי) Isi, the priest, the honoured eminent scholar (הכהן המכובד בירבי) . . ." Other synagogue texts praise collectively "all the members of the holy community (כל בני הבורתה קדישתה) who favor the restoration of the place"², or "all the holy people (קהל) who donated and made the mosaic"³; not to speak of such and such ". . . they and their children, whose generousities are constant everywhere, and who gave here five golden dinars"⁴. All these texts have been known for years, and they seem to reduce to meaningless Rot Gerson's claim that only on tombs we find titles of praise for the people mentioned in the inscriptions. The same could be said, by the way, as far as Christian epigraphy is concerned.

We shall not comment on the rest of the articles completing the volume, interest-

1. S. Safrai, "The Synagogues South of Mt. Judah", *Immanuel* 3 (1973-74), pp. 48-50. And now see also J. Naveh, *On Mosaic and Stone*, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1978, p. 115.
2. From the small synagogue at Bet Shean (Naveh, *op. cit.*, p. 77).
3. From Jericho (*ibid.*, p. 104).
4. From El-Hammah (*ibid.*, p. 54).

ing as they may be, for they do not deal with matters of direct concern for the reader of *Immanuel*. Their titles are: *The Distinctiveness of Book III of the Kuzari*, by Yochanan Silman (pp. 94-119); *The Doctrine of Creation in the Thought of R. Shneour Zalman of Liadi*, by Yoram Jacobson (pp. 307-368); *People and Nationality in the Thought of S.L. Steinheim*, by Eliezer Schweid (pp. 369-376); and *The Posture of Russian-Polish Hassidic Society vis-a-vis Zionism (1898-1900)*, by Yosef Salmon (pp. 377-438).

Finally, we can only wish to the collaborators and to the editorial body of this first issue of Eshel Beer-Sheva a successful continuation of this series, which promises to be an important contribution for the study of Jewish thought. Historic clarification is necessary. But it would be worthwhile to include in future issues some place to contemporary Jewish thought as well, if only for the sake of comparison.