

"TESTING" IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

by

Professor Jacob Licht\*

1. An overall glance at biblical research reveals that in every period there was a certain focal point of interest which captured the attention. There were periods where the scholars' guiding consideration was theological, considerations other than theological clarifications being ignored or thrust aside. Later on, and especially in the nineteenth century, biblical studies concerned themselves mainly with problems of literary criticism, such as the formation and composition of the books of the Bible, their sources, and so on. At the beginning of this century scholars (e. g. the school of Gunkel) turned more and more to an examination of the formal and aesthetic aspects of the biblical literature; while today it seems that most efforts are directed to the question of elucidating to what extent findings which come to us from the Ancient Near East can throw light on problems and phenomena of the Bible in the realms of history, literature and religion. This, however, carries with it a danger which we should not under-estimate: the ignoring of what is essential for the sake of what is marginal. Thus, there can be no doubt that when biblical scholars publish articles whose main purpose is a discussion of, e. g., the Mari documents, or perhaps a discussion of conclusions to be drawn regarding the relation of these documents to the Bible, they are dealing with a subject which, however important it may be in its own right, is nonetheless marginal at best so far as the Bible is concerned. Thus, there is a special importance today to studies of the Scriptures themselves, tending as they do to restore the balance between what is essential and what is secondary, although not irrelevant. Such is the work before us.

J. Licht, already known for his research into the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the present study examines one of the subjects of biblical theology which is without doubt a key idea in the biblical literature which nonetheless seems to be neglected by contemporary writers in favour of more so-called scientific and objective subjects.

In his introduction he touches upon a problem which crops up whenever one writes about the theology of the Bible: "Whoever has dealt with tenets and beliefs expressed in the Bible has had to face the difficulty that the biblical text lacks abstract and methodical ways of thought. Whatever

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the topic or idea which he is elucidating, the researcher is compelled to bring together all the scattered references in Scripture according to some method of his own, nor can he free himself from his personal viewpoints or from the commentaries and traditions on which he has been brought up, as the texts themselves do not join together in any satisfactory general and articulate picture". In other words, using the many bricks which the Bible offers its readers, anyone can construct a theological structure of his own, which poses a danger; that we end up with a personal theology that is masquerading as biblical theology. In Licht's opinion, this danger is particularly present when treating such central biblical ideas as the unity of God, his justice, his mercy; but things are different where less important subjects come under discussion, "which are not", as he says, "mentioned very frequently in the Scriptures. Rather, the relevant passages of Scripture complement one another in an orderly way, or else they differ one from another in such a way that one readily recognises the conflicting views, and one is able, without much trouble, to translate the biblical idea in question into our methodological language. Also, the things with which the biblical thinkers were wrestling are better recognised when the relevant passages of Scripture are limited in number; and from such wonderings and doubts it can be seen how their thinking and gropings moved to a logical consolidation. Thus, one can describe, albeit only to some extent, the nature of religious feeling in the Bible and its crystallisation into religious ideas. At times it is as though a window were opened, through which we can get a glimpse from the skirts of such thinking into its very centre."

The author sees *testing* in the Scriptures as one of those "marginal but instructive" subjects. In its seven chapters, Licht's book reviews the different meanings attached to the idea of testing as we see it in the Bible and in post-biblical Hebrew literature such as the Apocrypha and the Talmud. Emphasis is given to testing in the Bible, the other and later writings being examined for whatever light they throw on the words of the Bible. The chapters are as follows:

- I God Testing Man according to the Hebrew Bible
- II Man Testing God according to the Hebrew Bible
- III Uses and Meanings of the verb בָּחַן
- IV Testing in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, where independent of Biblical Tradition
- V The Test in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, where independent of Biblical Tradition
- VI Testing in the Writings of the Qumran Community
- VII Some Talmudic Statements on Testing.

At first glance, it would appear that the author's method of assembling his material has resulted in a study which can be described as merely semantic, for he has not looked for experiences of a "testing" nature in the books he consulted, but instead followed the method of dealing only with texts which explicitly used the words *try* or *test*. The Book of Job is an exception, for although its author does not use the word "testing" expressly, there is no doubt that Job was tested. However, the research indicates the author's concern with the theological meaning of trial or testing, especially God's testing of man. Why indeed does God test man? A study of all the texts shows that "according to the Scriptures, God tests man in order to see how he will conduct himself" (p. 17), and here a severe theological difficulty presents itself: why does God, who knows all things, have to test his creature "in order to know how he will behave"? The apparent tension that exists here between this immediate and simple purpose of trial on the one hand, and the teaching of Scripture that "the Lord is a God of knowledge" (1 Sam. 2:3), he "knoweth the thoughts of Man" (Ps. 94:11) on the other hand, did not bother the biblical writers, for it never occurred to them (lacking the tools of abstract thinking which we use today) that two opposite truths such as man's freedom of will and God's absolute rule could ever clash. Yet this tension does exist, as Licht shows, and it teaches us "*how deeply rooted in the Scriptures is the perception that man has full control over his deeds, whether it be to do good or to do evil, so much so that Scripture does not shrink from saying that even God himself must test him in order to know what he will do*" (p. 29, author's italics).

While there is a certain obscurity in the biblical passages with regard to this contradiction, the later literature boldly attempts to settle it by explaining the idea of testing in a different way from that of the Bible. Whereas the testing in Scripture involves an oppression which man undergoes (such as the demand that Abraham sacrifice his son; the sufferings of Job; the suffering of the people of Israel during their wanderings in the desert, etc.), the apocryphal writings, and especially *Ben-Sira*, view the idea of testing as no more than "life's trials" which constantly beset us. In the Apocrypha, man's whole life consists of daily trials or tests, and the question to be asked is not, Licht tells us, "how will he react, or what will he choose, but rather, will he get through it at all" (p. 79). The Talmudic literature, on the other hand, has its own interpretation of testing: not a tormenting situation, as Scripture reveals it to be, but rather a *temptation* which man is called to stand against. Thus, Satan tempts Abraham not to sacrifice his son as God directed him (b *Sanhedrin* 89b); and Joseph, who was called to stand firm against temptation in the form of his master's wife, is seen as Scripture's most decisive example of withstanding temptation. It is quite evident that, while the idea of trial may be described as a "testing" in the Scriptures, in the Talmudic literature it is more of a "temptation".

Jacob Licht points out that to view the trials in Scripture as temptation is convenient from at least one point of view, namely, that there can be no question here of the absence of the Divine foreknowledge, and trials remain "within the bounds of the traditional teaching about man's freedom of will" (p. 91).

The author finds, interestingly enough, that aside from the Book of Job and the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, the various accounts of trial as they are described in the biblical text have in effect the function of solving some difficulty which the biblical writers encountered. For example, how can it be that God would permit a false prophet to mislead his people (Deut. 13:2-6); or why does he allow great fear to fall upon the people at the time of his appearance before them on Mount Sinai; or why has not God driven out all the inhabitants of the Land of Israel when Joshua conquered the Land? The answer is always: "For the Lord your God is testing you" (Deut. 13:3).

And so trials or tests do not represent "an isolated, undefined concept which suddenly appears in moments of great emotionality, or as part of the stirring of religious enthusiasm, but is rather an integræ part of religious thought, a *theologoumenon*". An examination of the trials which the People of Israel passed through during their years of wandering in the wilderness leads Licht to an interesting hypothesis: Scripture describes how man has tried God at various times (Ps. 78:17-18; 106:14-15; Deut. 6:16), and also how God has tried man, at times on the same occasion. It appears to our author that in all cases of this sort, some kind of test did take place, but in the course of time two parallel explanations were given: the first one had it that man tested God, and the second that God tested his people. "One thing was apparent and clear to the people: that in a particular trial, someone had tried someone else; but two opposing answers were given ... so that we may view most of these stories about the trials in the wilderness as the fruit of two parallel traditions" (p. 37).

It is also possible that earlier traditions viewed these trials in a positive light, while later traditions interpreted them negatively. Whatever the truth of the matter, the author claims that "the period of the wanderings in the desert is clearly one of testings", and that "one may say that in the desert God and Israel tested one another".

2. I should like to bring up two considerations that occurred to me in reviewing Jacob Licht's present work. A quick glance through the book shows that no attempt has been made at a diachronic view of the concept of testing as it appears in the different books of the Bible. To put it differently, the book does not clarify the question of whether certain lines of development can be drawn in the biblical accounts of testing, such as that which we see in many studies on faiths and beliefs. However, though one may consider this as a shortcoming, it must be granted that in the final

analysis the synchronistic method which the author has followed has its advantages. When a writer organises his material around a developmental scheme, there is always the danger that the scheme itself may compel him to adopt certain forced interpretations and may impose on the texts a certain direction of development which may be untrue or irrelevant and artificial. In addition, a developmental scheme places one under the obligation of dating the various texts, which always tends to shift the emphasis away from theological examination toward other areas where speculations and dubious conclusions abound. In any case, I have no doubt that anyone who cares to reflect on the development of the idea of trial or testing, as presented in the Holy Scriptures, may well use this book as an important basis for his research.

My second point is in connection with the principle followed by the author, of dealing only with accounts of testing where the root word for *trying* or *testing* occurs in the text itself (he follows this rule even in the apocryphal literature which has not come down to us in the Hebrew language!), and with the Book of Job. It seems to me that there is a certain inconsistency in this method of working, and I rather regret that the reader is not given an explanation of why this method was adopted.

It is self-evident that a discussion which would concentrate only on passages where the word *try* or *test* explicitly appears, and for that reason would have to skip the trials of Job, would be utterly incomplete. On the other hand, by including in his study the Book of Job (although no explicit statement occurs there saying that God tested Job) our author admits that no theological study can get very far if it holds rigidly to the semantic approach. But if this is so, why has he not widened his range of subjects: and why have not other accounts of testing, like the one in the Garden of Eden, been included in his analysis? I am not saying that the author was duty bound to discuss a passage like this in the framework he had set for himself, but it would have seemed desirable at least to elaborate on the methodological aspect of this work and to clarify his reasons for not including biblical accounts whose meaning is clearly one of testing. It is worth remarking here that just the trial described in the account of the Garden of Eden was one of temptation; and it would be proper to contrast this with the statement that no trial in the sense of temptation occurs in the Bible. In the same connection: why did not the author of the Book of Job specifically use the word *try* or *test* in the opening chapters of his story? Is it perhaps because he viewed "tests" in a different light from that of Job's predicament?

Another point. When Eliphaz speaks to Job, we find him saying, "הֲנִסָּה דְבַר אֱלֹהִים תִּלְאָה" (Job 4:2), which may be interpreted in either two ways. One sense, which Jacob Licht appears to favour, justifies the English translation of this verse, "If one ventures a word with you, will you be

offended?"; namely, that Eliphaz is referring to himself, and asking Job if he may speak without grieving him. Or, a different interpretation would be, "Does some testing by God already exhaust you?" I am surprised that Licht has ignored this alternative interpretation, which he should have discussed even if it would not appeal to him. But it cannot be dismissed without mention. It is perhaps not by accident that the Book of Job, whose artistic use of language is one of its dominant characteristics, has pushed the word "נסה" (*try or test*) to a marginal use, only occurring in the speeches of one of Job's friends.

These comments of mine are made more in praise than in criticism, as they may convey to the reader that the author has not only succeeded in throwing light on one of these important subjects which, pulled together, give a faithful picture of biblical theology in its totality; he has also shown that it is possible to investigate this sensitive area in a scientific and objective manner, without giving in to the temptation of unnecessary speculation, which would distort the truth.

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