

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

A PORTRAIT OF THE "ENTZIQLOPEDIA MIQRA'IT"

by

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The most convenient source of information in Hebrew on contemporary Bible research is the *Entziqlopedia Miqra'it* (Biblical Encyclopedia), which is rather widely used by secondary school teachers, students and other intellectuals who take a general interest in the Bible. In this article I want to give a glimpse into the processes behind its publication, a look into the kitchen, so to speak, in a rather light-hearted way.

People of all kinds have asked me again and again: "When is the next volume going to be published?" I have never known the answer, nor has anybody else. Many well-known factors make slowness and irregularity of progress inevitable. Some editorial boards of encyclopedias have succeeded in instituting speedy progress; we are less sophisticated. We take our time to decide that Professor X might be approached to write an article on subject Y; if he agrees, we ask him a year later why we have not yet received his contribution. A few months later we do receive it, and find that it needs to be supplemented on certain points, which we ask Dr. Z to undertake. In another half year, an editor will have to find time to rewrite the whole article carefully, not treading on anybody's toes, and taking into account the remarks of various members of the editorial board. A staff worker will then check the references, another will arrange the bibliography, and another expert will improve the Hebrew style. Then there will be a paper shortage. It is thus quite understandable that work on the Encyclopedia, which started in the forties, before Israel's War of Independence, has not yet been completed. The first volume was published by "Mosad Bialik" in 1950, and the subsequent five volumes appeared in 1954, 1958, 1962, 1968 and 1971. Now (1975) we are more than half way through volume 7. Volume 8 will be the last, and will include a detailed index.

Thirty years is a long time, especially in contemporary Israel, and we have seen a considerable turnover in editors, secretaries, contributors engaged on the job. Much has been learned by trial and error, and everybody has left his or her mark. Through slow change, a tradition has become established and the work as a whole has acquired a character distinct from that of its component parts.

Originally the work was conceived as rather restricted in scope. Articles on the individual books of the Hebrew Bible were of course expected

to deal fully with problems of literary analysis, etc. As for the rest, the work was intended to treat mainly, though not exclusively, such matters as history, archaeology, topography and personal names. The very ancient periods of Near East history were regarded as more important than post-biblical times; full information on the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha seemed superfluous, and constant references to Rabbinic tradition of limited usefulness. It occurred to nobody that *ideas* could be treated at length. The emphasis was on "tangible" matters, as a result of which we have in the first volume (an extreme example) sixteen columns on the geology of Palestine but only five on eschatology. This sort of imbalance has been very gradually corrected, so that in volume six there is more space devoted to *Tzedek* (justice) than to *Tzon* (sheep). This change is the most noticeable one. The process of change as a whole is difficult to describe, being the result of many factors, some large, some small, some deliberate and some dictated by chance or necessity. The reader probably does not realise that the style is to some extent determined by the absence of quotation marks. An early editor decided that: a) a Jewish intellectual should recognise a biblical quotation unaided; b) quotation marks take up a lot of space, cost money and cause bother; and c) are an eyesore, typographically. All this is true; it is also true that writing without quotation marks, while quoting extensively, is not as easy as it seems.

Some subjects have been treated at greater length than strictly necessary, because the editors liked the article; others because they were reluctant to quarrel with the author. (Hence the dictum that top reputation does not necessarily yield top quality; the best work is done by people who are expert enough to know their minds and humble enough to accept corrections.) Meagre treatment of a subject means that nobody could be found to do a full-scale job; some subjects are conspicuous by their absence because the editors gave up hope of finding anybody even moderately competent, or of persuading such a person to write for the Encyclopedia. All these considerations, and many others, have combined to make the *Entziqlopedia Miqra'it* what it is.

An important factor for the good is the discipline of the alphabet itself. Scholarship is a matter of trends, fashions and controversies, it deals exhaustively with some subjects and pays only slight attention to others, while the alphabet is no respecter of fashions. It makes you write on this or that topic because it comes next in the alphabetical order. So you sum up scholarly opinion where you find it, and find something of your own to say where previous research is not available. It is quite an education.

A result of this education, and of other factors, is the relative independence of the *Entziqlopedia Miqra'it*. Grand theories, regarded almost universally as results established by scholarly tradition and best contemporary research, are for us just theories, entitled to a fair share of the available

space. Some of us believe in the existence of *J*, *E* and *P*, some do not; we are all sceptical about the more elaborate theories which make up the bulk of biblical scholarship. Of course, our writers like to speculate on their own, but only the most powerful ones (in terms of internal politics) have ever got away with it. As a rule, a writer is allowed, even encouraged, to state his view, if he can do so briefly, and if his theory is not too wild. He is also told that his most brilliant ideas are wasted by being set forth in an encyclopedia article where he cannot give them enough space; surely they would make a splendid full-scale paper.

I do not maintain that we have stuck exclusively to facts. Facts are things which are known to have happened, and are extremely rare in the realm of biblical scholarship. But we do have data. What a verse says is a datum; a discrepancy between two verses is another; archaeological evidence and interpreters' tradition might supply a third. It is your primary duty, when writing for the *Entziqlopedia Miqra'it*, to collect and present all the relevant data you can find. Theories, even when well established, are not data. You should, however, inform the reader of the various solutions proposed to the problems posed by the data, and indicate the one which seems preferable. When you think that you have guessed the truth about something, you must write, "Perhaps ...".

These obviously sound rules have not been strictly applied throughout the Encyclopedia, but they are established with us as a strong tradition, as a main *desideratum* of editorial policy, and as something which our veteran writers have acquired as a kind of second nature. This is the main factor in the overall character of the work, and makes it, presumably, rather strange reading to anyone who has been taught in one of the more dominant traditions of Old Testament scholarship. To such people we must appear as harmonists, apologists, uncritical of the text, or quaintly old-fashioned. Some of our articles, it is true, are somewhat harmonistic, some are entirely free of this fault. As I see it, harmonism versus the critical approach is not the issue. What we are trying to achieve is plain responsibility, to the text and to the reader.

It has been hard work, nor is it yet finished. When the last volume has gone to the printers we shall probably start a series of supplements. Some of our articles have become hopelessly dated, some were not quite adequate when written, for some which so far remain unwritten we hope to find a competent author. It will be a continuous challenge to the next generation.

The *Entziqlopedia Miqra'it* has its place in contemporary Israeli culture. Certain companion pieces, such as commentaries or a specialised journal, would be useful, but at present I cannot see the people who have the time and ability to do all that should be done. We should also like to have our work translated into English, thus making it available to others who,

as I have explained, will not like it very much. There are also, I know, some silent sceptics among Gentile Old Testament scholars, who might find our peculiar approach rather instructive. Nor is the *Entziqlopedia Miqra'it* all challenge to the establishment of Old Testament studies; quite a large part of it is straightforward information. All this makes a translation desirable, but up to now no money has been found for the undertaking.

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