

THE WORLD JEWISH BIBLE SOCIETY

by LOUIS KATZOFF

In 1949, one year after the establishment of the State of Israel, a number of Biblical scholars banded together for the purpose of enhancing knowledge of the Hebrew Bible within the Israeli public. The original name adopted by the group was the Israel Society for Biblical Research. Over the course of time, its activities were expanded to include study groups beyond the geographic limits of the State of Israel, and an additional name was assumed: the World Jewish Bible Society. Professor Haim Gevaryahu, chairman of both societies, has been the moving spirit in the growth of this movement. This group quickly awakened the dormant desire for Bible study, leading to the establishment, first of scores, then of hundreds of such study groups in Israel, in kibbutzim, moshavim, private homes and synagogues in cities and villages.

Soon after the founding of the society, the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, joined it with an enthusiasm that gave strong impetus to the society's rapid advance. In partnership with the second and third presidents of the State, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and Zalman Shazar, Ben-Gurion established a central study group, which met regularly at his home, and later (following his retirement to Sdeh Boqer in the Negev) in the official state residence of Presidents Ben-Zvi, Shazar, and Katzir. More recently, Prime Minister Menahem Begin hosted the group in his own Jerusalem state residence. To date, over a score of scholarly volumes have been published, comprising the lectures and discussions on biblical themes conducted at the homes of these former heads of state.

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The Prime Minister's and President's study group was essentially a model gathering, to which Bible scholars presented learned papers, which were then discussed by the participants in the group. In Mr. Begin's circle, a new element was introduced: experts in related non-biblical fields were brought in to contribute their insights towards the better understanding of the background of the biblical text. Thus, Egyptologists were invited to enhance the understanding of the Egyptian milieu; physicists were asked to tell about the various theories prevalent in the scientific world concerning the origins of the universe; medical doctors to expound upon the diseases found in the Bible; an engineer came to explain how the Golden Calf was constructed by means of the "lost wax process"; etc.

Conferences and Competitions

It soon became evident that organized convocations were necessary to meet the needs of the many avid Bible lovers who were engaged in active Bible study groups in kibbutz, city or hamlet. Regional conferences were arranged for this purpose in different parts of Israel, which became attractive focal points for intense study as well as refreshing confrere occasions. The high point of these get-togethers has been the annual National Conference held in the spring, usually in Jerusalem. In addition to papers read by scholars and learned laymen on a variety of Biblical problems, the intensive four-day confab generally culminates in a full-day outing to biblical sites.

An extraordinary conference was held in Chicago about twenty years ago, featuring Mr. Ben-Gurion as the keynote speaker. In a spectacular gathering of many hundreds of American Jewish leaders for the purpose of Bible study, the Book of Books was dramatically brought to the attention of Diaspora Jewry, fulfilling the verse: "from Zion shall come forth Torah." Many local study groups were the outcome of this American conference.

Another high point of the Society's program is the annual World Bible Contest for Jewish Youth, held on Israel Independence Day. This event, which is featured on Israel television, brings together about twenty-five to thirty winners of local and regional contests from all parts of the world to Jerusalem. The contestants spend two weeks in Israel preparing for the preliminary and final contests, followed by a reception at the President's home and an organized tour of the country. Such an undertaking demands a smoothly-run, efficient organization. Thanks to Ben-Gurion's tie-in of the contest with the pre-military school branch of the Israel Defense Forces – the Gadna – this event has become one of the main highlights of Yom ha-Atzmaut.

Five Bible contests for Jewish and non-Jewish students of the Hebrew Scriptures have been held periodically over the past three decades, which have stimulated delegations from more than thirty countries to come to Jerusalem in order to compete in the event. The most recent contest, the fifth, was held in 1981. Of the

thirty-one contestants, eight were Jews. Aharon Ben-Shoshan, a blind 43-year-old school teacher from Acre, representing Israel, emerged the winner; second prize went to Fransisco Evas de Ponto, a 38-year-old Seventh Day Adventist from Brazil; while third place was divided between Alias Hadida Salame of Venezuela and Luis Diego Martin of Costa Rica.

Due to the diversity of backgrounds of the participants, questions and answers were prepared in eleven languages. For the English section, a choice of five different Bible translations was made available to the participants. The contest was administered jointly with the Ministry of Education and Culture, with the assistance of the consular offices of the Foreign Ministry of the State of Israel. Many millions viewed the final session through broadcasts relayed to their national TV networks. The languages used included English, French, Spanish, German, Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch and Afrikaans. Hebrew was the official language, with simultaneous translations made available to the participants. Preliminary contests were held in the various countries involved, broadcast on local TV and radio. In the case of Brazil, for example, twenty such contests were held in the individual federated states until a national representative was chosen.

One of the highlights of the 1981 event was the reception for the guests from abroad hosted by Prime Minister Begin at his state residence, featuring a paper given by the Prime Minister himself on the relationship between the Prophet Samuel and King Saul (published in *Dor le-Dor*, summer 1983).

The questions were prepared by an Israeli scholar, Joseph Shaar, after which an international group of scholars of different faiths reviewed each question carefully for its clarity. This committee was headed by the Dominican Father Marcel Dubois, chairman of the Philosophy Department of the Hebrew University. A refreshing aspect of the committee meetings was the psalm read in Hebrew by Father Dubois at the beginning of each session.

Publications

The society's Hebrew quarterly, *Beth Mikra*, has been appearing regularly for the past thirty years, the one hundredth issue having been published last year. Its high level of scholarship has added much prestige to the organization. Though the periodical has no specific theology or approach, its tone is rather conservative, eschewing ideas that might offend people steeped in religious faith, its principal aim being to bring readers closer to an appreciation of the Biblical heritage. The editor is the widely known geographer and historian, Ben-Zion Luria.

A more popularly-oriented publication is the English language quarterly, *Dor le-Dor*, directed towards knowledgeable Jews who wish to augment their understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. This quarterly aims to maintain a balance

between popular and more technical approaches to the Bible; it is distributed to members of the society in many countries. *Dor le-Dor* recently completed its Bar Mitzvah year of publication, and to mark the occasion published a twelve-year composite index in Number 52. The editor and co-editor are Dr. Louis Katzoff and Dr. Shimon Bakon.

In addition to the two quarterlies, the society publishes a Bible reading calendar every three years, designating the chapter of the day within a triennial cycle. Begun over forty years ago by an English group known as the Bible Readers Union, organized and led by Rev. Joseph Halpern, it was eventually taken up by the World Jewish Bible Society as a world-wide enterprise. In addition to the daily chapter from the Bible, the Torah and Prophetic lections for each Sabbath are listed for reading on Fridays and Saturdays. The compiler of the calendar is Chaim I. Abramowitz, Assistant editor of *Dor le-Dor*.

World Jewish Bible Center

One of the long-range goals of the society is to establish a World Jewish Bible Center in Jerusalem. The society takes pride in the Bible Center and Museum in Tel Aviv, and is now launching an effort to establish the Jerusalem Center as its principal institution. The chairman of the proposed center is Chaim Finkelstein, former head of the Department of Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization, and S. J. Kreutner, former director of Keren Hayesod. Efforts are currently under way to integrate all the activities of the society under the unified aegis of the new Bible Center.

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