

A JEWISH BIBLE SCHOLAR IN SOVIET RUSSIA

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מאיר אליועיני (קנטרוביץ), מחקרי מקרא מן השבי הסובייטי. ירושלים: הוועד הציבורי להוצאת מחקרי אליועיני, תשמ"ד

Meir Elioenai (Kantorovich) [Bible Studies from the Soviet Captivity], Jerusalem: 1984.

I

Recently, there has been published in Israel a collection of articles from the scholarly work of Meir Kantorovich, or “Elioenai,” who died on December 16, 1980 (9th Tevet, 5741) at the age of 74. He had spent nearly thirty years of his life in exile in Zerenda, a remote village in the Kazakhstan Republic of the USSR, hundreds of kilometers from any cultural center, under sub-human conditions of spiritual and physical deprivation. He had previously spent eight years in the Soviet work camp Severuralag — all due to his continuous Zionist activity in Lithuania during the period preceding its becoming a Soviet republic in 1940.

From the early 1930s, Kantorovich was known throughout Jewish Lithuania (the “Land of Israel of the Diaspora”) as one of the outstanding teachers of Judaica,

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particularly in the fields of Hebrew language and Bible. Over the course of time, he became recognized as an expert even in areas far beyond the borders of Lithuania. He also held a distinguished position in the Zionist movement in Lithuania, particularly within the rank of the General Zionist Party (Fraction B), to which he had belonged from his youth. His party activities were concentrated in the realms of ideological education and publicity, but he also represented his party in the Zionist Congress and visited Eretz Yisrael, then Palestine.

Above all else, he dedicated his life's strength and energy to the inculcation of his hundreds of students and disciples with a sense of Jewish national consciousness and pride. He did this both within the framework of the Hebrew Gymnasium in Kovno, where he taught from the early 1930s, and in private groups which he concluded during the afternoon hours. Many of the students at the gymnasium, who for various reasons did not belong to one of the Zionist youth movements, acquired their theoretical Zionist education in these groups under his direction, and many profound deliberations on various aspects of Hebrew nationalism and culture were held within their framework.

I recall that on that Friday, September 1st, 1939, when the Second World War broke out, Kantorovich devoted the entire class period to explaining the significance of this event from the Jewish point of view and the possibility that a huge holocaust might occur in its wake. He called upon us, his students, to remain loyal Jews as he had taught us, proud of the past and trusting in the future. Indeed, everything happened even more quickly than we could have imagined — ten months later the Red Army entered Lithuania and it was transformed into a Soviet republic: Hebrew educational institutions were closed, and most of their students and teachers were forced to continue in Yiddish schools. Among the few who were barred from any position in education was Kantorovich, who was accused by the new rulers of being a dangerous, fanatical Zionist. He inadvertently contributed to this impression by his open refusal to cooperate with the new regime, preferring a life of bare subsistence from book-selling and private Hebrew lessons. In secret meetings with his favorite students, he continued to cultivate their national consciousness, in so doing indirectly contributing to the establishment of the underground movement *Irgun B'rit Tziyon* (Organization of the Covenant of Zion), which was founded during the period of Soviet rule and continued to be active throughout the period of the Nazi occupation of the Kovno Ghetto and subsequently in the German concentration camps.

The vibrance of his personality and his influence on his students doubtless continued for many years thereafter. As one of those who had the privilege of studying Hebrew literature and language, Jewish history, and Biblical criticism under him even before the war, I can testify personally to the extent to which we

cherished his teachings in our hearts, and how they strengthened us during the difficult times of the ghetto battles and the concentration camps, in the Partisans and in the army. After the war, when the remnants of his students went to live in Israel, they discovered that their beloved old teacher was left “on the other side of the dark mountains,” in a state of terrible deprivation, but still alive! This seemed to us a miracle.

Despite the conditions of loneliness and alienation in which he lived, this stubborn “Litvak” was not broken, and even the trials and sufferings of Job could not overwhelm him. As the Sages said, “the hammer can shatter glass, but it molds iron.” In his long years of exile, he studied a number of subjects that were close to his heart. In the absence of books and other necessary materials, his ideas and discoveries were recorded from memory on small slips of paper. Already in the first letters which I was privileged to receive from him in Israel during the 1950’s, one can see the first hints of his daring decision to continue to cultivate his old loves — the Hebrew language and Bible. He begged his surviving students and friends in Israel and overseas to send him books, writing materials and the like. In fact, most of his letters¹ dealt with these matters. In this area, which was more important to him than any other, he proved especially stubborn. I remember that, over a period of about a year and a half, I several times attempted to send him a copy of the Hebrew Bible, which each time was confiscated by the authorities. Nevertheless, he continued urging me to try again and again. Finally, he devised a strategy. On October 8, 1960, he wrote me: “Hide it inside one of their modern books, like the poems of Shlonsky, as he is a progressive man and one of the supporters of the world peace movement.” I took his advice, and he received his Bible.

Not long thereafter, his first studies in the language of the Bible bore fruit and were even published in Israel.² In 1977, his impressive collection of studies on Ecclesiastes and Proverbs appeared in Jerusalem.³ Alongside the satisfaction which the publication of this work gave Elioenai, he expressed his disappointment at the many errors present in this edition. During this period his health deteriorated, but despite this he did not interrupt his studies. The material continued to reach Israel bit by bit, in various circuitous ways.

1. Some of these letters are preserved by the “Genazim” Foundation of the Organization of Hebrew Authors in Israel, while others have been collected by the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem.

2. See bibliography in the collection under discussion.

3. *Mehqarim be-Qohelet uve-Mishley* (Jerusalem: World Jewish Bible Society, 1977).

The present work contains three studies by Elioenai: two essays on the prophet Isaiah — an essay on “Isaiah and the Wisdom School” and a longer study of the “Throne Vision” in Isaiah 6 — and a comprehensive essay on the religious life of the Jews of Elephantine.⁴ It also includes an autobiographical sketch of the author, selected letters to his friends and students in Israel, and a bibliography. The author manifests himself here both as a scholar and a writer. His Hebrew style contains many new words and terms, which he coined in order to liberate modern Hebrew from excessive foreignisms. As a scholar, Elioenai has an independent approach, using great intellectual power to penetrate to the truth as he sees it. As in his earlier books published in Hebrew, his exegetical perspective is based upon in-depth linguistic analysis of the texts in question. He is not afraid to suggest far-reaching, novel conclusions, while simultaneously maintaining deep respect for the Masoretic version of the text, without slipping into fundamentalist dogmatism. From this, we may understand his negative attitude towards German Protestant Biblical scholarship, which was suspect in his eyes both because of its anti-Jewish orientation and because of the disrespect with which it treats the Biblical text. Elioenai appears in these essays as one waging the battle of Torah; this is not the writing of a scholar calmly seeking the truth while cloistered in the ivory tower of academic objectivity, real or illusory. Elioenai is involved with his whole being in the questions with which he is dealing. His writing is tumultuous and impassioned; the honor of the Torah is his personal honor.

In his opinion, the 6th chapter of Isaiah depicts a double reorientation in the life of the prophet. First, he cuts himself off from the “people of impure lips” among whom he lives, who represent the sceptical philosophy to which he subscribed in his own youth (indeed, in the first essay of the book, Elioenai argues that Isaiah originally belonged to the Wisdom School, but detached himself from this trend because of its cynical approach to the question of theodicy). At the same time, he takes upon himself the prophetic task, which is primarily one of rebuke and warning to Israel. In a sharp polemic with Yehezkel Kaufmann, he attempts to prove that this is in fact the chapter of Isaiah’s initiation. He maintains that the purpose and content of his mission, as defined in this chapter, involved profound educational and moral content. By this position, he arrives at radical disagreement with Buber, according to whom Isaiah’s primary mission was to lead the people astray and to increase their obstinacy through unrealistic messages of salvation which would be rejected by his audience.

His essay on the religious life of the Jews of Elephantine is written in the same polemic spirit; here too, his linguistic gifts and self-confidence are striking. His

4. The first part of this essay was published in *Beth Mikra* 26 [86] (1981), pp. 217–230.

aim here is to prove that the Jews of Elephantine were faithful adherents of Judaism, and to refute the widely-held view that their worship was syncretistic. This exciting discussion is focused upon the purification of the names Onatyahu, Anatbitel, Ashmabitel, Harambitel, and Bitel, which have generally been thought of as theophoric names referring to foreign deities worshipped alongside the God of Israel. With keen originality, he dissociates these names from their presumed theophoric meanings. Thus, for example, he drives the name Onatyahu from the Hebrew word *ma'on*, meaning dwelling place, making it refer to the dwelling place or sanctuary of the God of Israel, *yahu* (one of the standard forms of the name of God commonly used in names), rather than to the Ugaritic deity, Onat. Likewise, according to him, the name Ashmabitel bears no relationship to the Aramean deity, Ashima; rather, the letter *shin* in this name may be vocalized as *s* rather than *sh*, the name then being pronounced Asmabitel, and referring to the treasury of the Temple in Jerusalem. Harambitel is derived from the Hebrew term *herem*, used to designate something consecrated for use by the Temple, so that the name alludes to the holiness of the Temple. He likewise refutes the assumption of the existence of a deity named Beth-El.

According to his historical theory, the sanctuary at Elephantine was built shortly after the Destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, and no one saw in this a violation of the Deuteronomic law concerning the centralization of the sacrificial service in the chosen place (i.e., Jerusalem), a commandment which is only in when the people of Israel will arrive at, or have already arrived at, “their rest and their inheritance” (Deut. 12:9). It therefore does not apply after the time of the destruction of the Temple.

There is no doubt that his words, especially his exciting claims concerning the faith of the Jews of Elephantine, will awaken interest and even controversy among the ranks of Bible scholars and historians. It is hard to know whether his views will be accepted or not, but it is clear that they cannot be ignored, as they are presented on a level worthy of the term “scholarship.”

III

Nevertheless, the work of this author cannot be judged by the usual strict standards of scholarship, to be held accountable for every quotation, article or book which was overlooked. His articles were written in the “valley of the shadow of death” of the Soviet prison camp, where the author lived under conditions of miserable poverty and deprivation, remote from the centers of Torah and knowledge, with only a few books which his students and admirers succeeded in smuggling to him from Israel and the United States. There, in the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan in Central Asia, thrown in among non-Jews and coarse, primitive peasants, under the watchful eyes of the Soviet Secret Police, dwelled a lone Jew, exiled after suffering the infernal afflictions of the Holocaust in which his

family was murdered, and after being “freed” from the Siberian exile as an “enemy of the people” because of his love for Zion and for the Torah of Israel.

There he lived, and in his few spare hours he secluded himself with the Book of Books. By his own testimony, those hours were among the happiest of his life. He wrote with self-sacrifice and spiritual inspiration, his only desire being the study of Torah for its own sake and “the glorifying of the Bible, the source of our soul and our existence” — as he wrote in a short biographical note. He fulfilled the words of the prophet: “your words were found, and I did eat them; your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart; for your name was called upon me, O Lord, God of Hosts” (Jer. 15:16). By virtue of these studies and those which preceded them, Elioenai entered the ranks of the Hebrew renaissance movement which has arisen in the past two generations. Today, he occupies a place of honor within the community of Bible scholars in Israel and the researchers and revivers of the Hebrew language. This book is an eternal memorial to his heroic spirit, which was able to endure afflictions of body and soul. This is the intimate conversation of Meir Kantorovich, of blessed memory, with his God, in which his soul found redemption in returning to its Jewish sources. May his soul be bound up in eternal life!

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