

The Demise of the Hebraist (principally in Great Britain)

Edward Ullendorff

The planned *Festschrift* in honour of Addi Wasserstein has, very sadly and poignantly, become a memorial volume. The death of this fine scholar and truly saintly man has touched the hearts of his friends and colleagues in a very special way.

It had originally been my intention to say something about the Hebrew Qumran fragments of the text of Jubilees in relation to the few parallel Greek passages (a subject that would have been most fitting to honour our late friend). But when volume XIII of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* reached me for review, in July 1995, I soon found that the actual number of Hebrew words preserved is exiguous in the extreme. This is so when one studies the tiny fragments on the photographs rather than the over-generous passages supplied by the editor(s).

I then decided to turn to the subject of the steadily vanishing number of professional Hebraists — a topic close to my own heart and that of Wasserstein. During the past ten to twelve years this calamity had been a constantly recurring theme at each of our meetings at Oxford. We shared this pessimism and felt deeply about the reality of this phenomenon. Last July I gave a brief talk on this subject to a conference of Jewish studies at Oxford which provoked a lively discussion. I do not recall any dissentient voices on the diagnosis, though views on the causes and possible remedies differed to some extent. At that time I had no intention of publishing the gist of my observations, particularly as I received subsequently some reassuring indications that at one place at any rate efforts had been initiated to improve the situation. I await developments with a mixture of anxiety and hope.

The present Memorial Volume, however, offers an opportunity of repeating those unpublished remarks — perhaps in a somewhat attenuated form. Some thirty years ago I offered some desultory thoughts, accompanied by a heavy question mark, to my colleagues at University College, London, on the subject of the conceivable or even likely disappearance of the professional Hebraist, the person who studies the grammar, the language, and the *thesaurus totius Hebraicitatis*: pre-biblical epigraphy, the ת"ח, Mishna, Medieval and Modern as well as Contemporary Hebrew. Arabists do it, comprehensively, so why not Hebraists?

In the intervening generation the situation has changed out of all recognition, almost catastrophically, in Britain, in Europe and, I think, in the U.S.A. Of course, there remain some honourable exceptions — such as James Barr or Geoffrey Khan and a few others, but the trend is unmistakable — except, perhaps naturally, in Israel, and in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in particular, where we still have giants like Ben Ḥayyim, Blau, Morag, Rosén in their different ways (though all these are already technically retired); and among younger scholars we rejoice in the work accomplished by Gideon and Esther Goldenberg, Simon Hopkins and some others.

In retrospect the period from 1946 to about 1980, barely 35 years, was perhaps the golden period of Semitic studies in Britain, probably as a result of the Scarbrough Commission appointed by Anthony Eden (himself an orientalist) towards the end of the Second World War. In England there had, of course, been two universities only (Oxford and Cambridge) until early in the 19th century. The two Regius Chairs of Hebrew at Oxbridge were 17th-century foundations. But Scotland, with its *four* ancient universities, had four Hebrew Chairs of the same vintage at (in this order) St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh. Most of these embraced other Semitic languages as well. After the Second World War universities like London, Manchester, Durham, etc., could boast prestigious chairs in this field, and there were, for some 30 years, close on a dozen chairs of Hebrew in Great Britain. Traditionally most of these, though not all, had arisen from the needs of the Theological Faculties. It was, therefore, a surprise to me when I was told, on appointment to the Chair of Hebrew and Semitic languages at Manchester University, in 1958, that I was the first Jew to occupy such a position in Britain. On the continent of Europe Hebrew studies had been pursued with great vigour since renaissance times and by highly distinguished practitioners, particularly throughout the 19th century.

It is interesting to observe that the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, and the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* all include extensive lists of Christian Hebraists; in the last-named we find no fewer than 61 columns compiled by Raphael Loewe. Jewish Hebraists remain unrecorded. In the *Judaica* the entry 'Hebrew' has encountered great problems: in the appropriate volume there are articles on Hebrew Grammar and Literature, while 'Hebrew Language' and 'Hebrew Linguistics' have been relegated, separately, as an afterthought כביכול, to a Supplement volume, though some of these latter contributions are extremely good, particularly that by Esther Goldenberg.

All these fine developments, particularly of the post-war era, have been curtailed — nay, murdered — almost in one fell swoop in the 1980s and early 90s. The Chairs in three Scottish universities have disappeared, and the fourth, at Aberdeen, remains only 'thanks to the grace of the incumbent's late birth' (as Chancellor Kohl has averred so disingenuously in a different context). This post, too, will no doubt go when the present holder of the Chair retires. That fine

Hebraist, Willie McKane, has had no successor at St. Andrews, though there are still two excellent lecturers in post there. The Chairs at Durham, Manchester, and London are orphaned, and the general trend has been from Hebrew to 'Old Testament Studies' or 'Jewish Studies' — just as it has been from Arabic to 'Islamic Studies', in both cases at times even *without* a knowledge of Hebrew and Arabic. One ancient university has been disgraced by the demise of Arabic language and by the placing of Arab history under the aegis of the Professor of terrorism.

The Society for Old Testament Study (SOTS) has lost many of its specifically Hebrew practitioners: the Godfrey Drivers and Winton Thomases, who gave such kudos and verve to that Society, are no more. At Oxford, 50 years ago, the Regius Professor Herbert Danby could translate into English the entire Mishna and was master of all other phases of the language as well. His immediate successors were purely Old Testament scholars and not Hebraists — despite the nomenclature of the chair on which they sat — until the advent of James Barr who effortlessly embraced the entire discipline. The present incumbent of the Regius Chair at Oxford also lends distinction to the subject which he professes.

The SOTS Book List, since the golden days of Rowley or Knibb, nowadays produces a different balance. Too many books are noticed in three or four lines, and Hebrew is no longer faring well at the hands of those charged with its custody.

At the School of Oriental & African Studies of London University, Hebrew is now confined to its modern phase; and at University College, London, the Chair of Hebrew is dead, while Chairs of modern Jewish History (or similar nomenclatures) have replaced it. True, there are at least two much underpromoted lecturers who are highly competent to teach all phases of Hebrew if that were their official assignment. I refer to Ada Rapoport Albert and to Michael Weitzman.

The Readership in Jewish Studies at Oxford has in practice excluded the teaching of Talmud, which (to the best of my knowledge) is not offered in any university institution in this country (other than Jews' College). And the admirable Yarnton Centre of Hebrew Studies (now re-christened [if that is the right term] 'and of Jewish Studies') has never employed scholars who were teaching and researching in all phases of Hebrew from Moses to Agnon or beyond, though Modern or Israeli Hebrew is strongly represented by George Mandel and Glenda Abramson. But what about serious Hebrew language, grammar and syntax, in their changing complexion, throughout the ages? Can a Hebrew Centre do justice to its name without these concerns?

Even in Israel there are now some in highly prestigious institutions whose Hebrew grammar is strangely aberrant and who pronounce *mekir* מְכִיר instead of *makkir* מַכִּיר without blushing and point it מְכִיר! And a teaching tool

produced in Britain prescribes or allows or encourages *יהיה* or *נולד לו בת* or *יש אה* את הבעיות האלה.

There was a time when Jews looked after their language. Just think of medieval grammarians, such as Saadiah Gaon or Menaḥem ibn Saruq, Dunash ben Labrat, or Jonah ibn Janah and others — true Hebraists. And in the early 16th century Johann Reuchlin's *Rudimenta linguae hebraicae* was the first grammar written by a Christian. By the end of Reuchlin's life, and thanks to his immense reputation, Hebrew studies had been established as a recognized subject in European education. Thus within a few decades a tradition had grown up according to which Hebrew (and even Aramaic and Syriac) belonged, along with Latin and Greek, to the proper equipment of the cultivated man. Reuchlin saw to it that Chairs of Hebrew were set up in many universities of Northern Europe. In the 17th century the great Ludolf added to Hebrew and Semitic Studies grammars and dictionaries of Semitic Ethiopian; and in Britain no fewer than six Chairs of Hebrew were founded.

In Germany, in the 19th century, we have the outstanding figure of Gesenius whose grammar and lexicon continue to be essential tools in their manifold updated editions — as well as being the basis of Brown, Driver, Briggs' dictionary. Gesenius was followed by Ewald, Nöldeke, Olshausen, Stade, Bauer-Leander, König, Bergsträsser, and many others. Among Jews the names of S.D. Luzzato, Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, M.H. Segal (whose Mishnaic Grammar in English and Hebrew has never yet been superseded) stand out. Torczyner/Tur-Sinai, W.F. Albright, S.R. and G.R. Driver and some of their pupils devoted all their considerable energies to the exploration of the Hebrew language.

And at the present time we are left with some 'have-beens' in retirement; some of them profound scholars whose work will live, and their retirement may be very active. But when I survey the present scene there may be some spots of consolation — such as the aforementioned Goldenbergs (E. and G.), Hopkins, or Khan — but the overall picture is depressing. Where are the future Geseniuses, and Drivers, Albrights, Kutschers, or Ben-Ḥayyim or Blaus?

These are very superficial and desultory reflections — no doubt with many errors of commission and omission, plenty of lacunae, and views which may well be awry. But I believe, genuinely and sincerely, that there can scarcely be any doubt that Hebrew as a language is neglected by those whose duty it is to care for its nurture and its future.