

Is There a Unique Jewish Perspective on Modern Biblical Criticism?
In Memoriam: Professor Moshe Greenberg and Professor Jacob Milgrom

Can the critical study of the Bible in the academic world be seen to have a clear Jewish aspect which distinguishes it from the work of Catholic and Protestant colleagues? While the issue has been pursued from a number of perspectives,¹ there is no clear consensus which is based primarily on the content and method of that scholarship. But there is no doubt whatsoever that Professors Moshe Greenberg and Jacob Milgrom, both of whom passed away during the past month, represented some of the best examples of Jewish critical biblical scholarship.

Both men were giants in the field: Greenberg wrote on many different aspects of biblical literature, from narrative to law, from prophecy to psalms, from biblical theology to wisdom literature. In addition to his many articles and his central position on the translation committee of the JPS Tanakh, his best known works are his two volumes of commentary on the book of Ezekiel, and his one volume abridgement of the work of the seminal Israeli Bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann.² The latter work was extremely important in introducing Kaufmann's thought and method to a scholarly and popular audience outside of Israel. Greenberg was also the first Bible scholar to win the coveted Israel Prize.

Milgrom, on the other hand, focused intensively on the Priestly literature of the Torah, giving us a monumental three-volume commentary on the book of Leviticus, a trenchant commentary on the Book of Numbers, and many individual studies of specific matters in the levitical corpus.³ It can be fairly said that he singlehandedly reawakened scholarly interest in this field. The two men were longtime friends, and as a reflection of the closeness and respect between them I mention a remarkable act of cooperation: When Greenberg realized that, for reasons of health, he would be unable to complete his work on Ezekiel, he turned to Professor Milgrom, both as his friend and as the person he felt to be most qualified to write the final volume of the commentary. Milgrom agreed, and the results will be published soon in the Anchor Bible series.

The commonalities between the two men are striking. Both were among the first generation of Jewish Bible scholars to obtain professorships in top-flight secular universities, Greenberg at the University of Pennsylvania and Milgrom at the University of California Berkeley. Ordained as rabbis at JTS, both had deep roots in Jewish learning, and were especially attentive to traditional Jewish interpretation of the Bible. Consideration of Rabbinic and medieval material was always integrated into their discussions of the meaning of the text. Both had profound respect for the received biblical text, and, in contrast with much of normative Protestant biblical scholarship, often argued for the priority of the Masoretic Text over suggested emendations – though both were willing to accept such emendations where the evidence warranted.

¹ A fuller discussion of the issue can be found in S.D. Sperling, *Students of the Covenant*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 1-13, and in the references cited there. Moshe Greenberg expressed himself briefly on the subject in the prologue to his collected essays *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1995) pp. 3-8.

² *Ezekiel 1-20*, New York: Doubleday, 1983; *Ezekiel 21-37*, New York: Doubleday, 1997; *The Religion of Israel*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

³ *Leviticus 1-16*, New York, Doubleday, 1991; *Leviticus 17-22*, New York: Doubleday, 2000, New York: Doubleday, 2001; *Numbers*, Philadelphia: JPS, 1990.

Each man had a deep engagement with the Jewish world, both intellectual and emotional, and they shared a sense of responsibility toward their various audiences, extending from the smaller group of Jewish Bible scholars, to the Jewish community at large, and beyond that to all those who looked to the Bible for spiritual and moral guidance. In addition to defining themselves as teachers within the Jewish tradition, Greenberg and Milgrom were also pronounced humanists in that they saw themselves addressing a wider audience as well. The Jewish interpretive tradition was of great significance to them, but it was by no means the entire story; the universal side of the biblical thought was never far from their minds. While they demonstrated the highest standards of rigorous scholarship, neither man was an ivory tower scholar. On the contrary, they openly confronted contemporary issues as part of their reading of the biblical text.

At different stages in their adult lives both men moved to Israel with their families, Greenberg to teach at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem from 1970 until his retirement in 1996, and Milgrom after his retirement from Berkeley in 1994. After many years living far from one another they renewed their friendship and eventually became neighbors and study partners in a Shabbat study group which continued for many years. Both were deeply admired teachers at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, sat on the academic council of the Institute and were centrally involved in its academic concerns.

In their work both men were trained by acknowledged experts in the field, but they moved beyond their teachers to forge their own distinctive paths in biblical scholarship. Greenberg always paid homage to the two men he saw as his mentors – E.A. Speiser and Yehezkel Kaufmann. Beside the fact that their presence was felt in his scholarship, they were symbolically present in his study in the form of photographs, and even in the Bibles he kept handy for use in study sessions. Once, examining a particular biblical verse in such a group, Moshe asked us to note the signatures on the flyleaf of the Bibles we were using. Mine had been the personal Bible of Speiser and another study partner was using Kaufmann's own Tanakh! These were more than keepsakes; they represented in a very physical way Moshe's sense that one continued to study and to learn with one's teachers as well as with one's students. While Greenberg continued the traditions of their scholarship, he was never simply a disciple. His emphasis on the necessity for seeing both the critical distinctions within the text as well as the larger picture conveyed by the text - what he referred to as "holistic interpretation" – went far beyond what he learned from his mentors.

Jacob Milgrom completed his doctoral studies under H.L. Ginsberg at JTS, but the path his scholarship took was markedly different from that of his mentor, moving far beyond philological concerns to take up theological matters which emerged from the priestly literature. In this Jacob did not emulate any single predecessor, but forged his own remarkable synthesis of traditional learning with the disciplines of anthropology and history of religions. His fascination with Leviticus and the priestly literature knew no bounds, particularly in his desire to understand and uncover the ethical concerns on which they are based. No small detail in the text was unimportant to him, no textual matter too trivial to be taken up. Most striking was the fact that his students, his interlocutors, and his critics were always part of his work. An entire section of some 30 pages of the last volume of his Leviticus commentary is devoted to these matters – not in order to have the last word, but in order to extend the discussion.

Years before I met either man I encountered their work. I remember well the first piece I read by each of them. In the case of Moshe Greenberg, it was his seminal essay “Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law”.⁴ While this was my first exposure to ancient Near Eastern legal traditions, far more important for me were the conclusions drawn by the article – one should mine the biblical law corpus not just as an indication of legal practice in ancient Israel, but as a means of gaining an understanding of Israel’s values, in contrast with those reflected in the ancient Near Eastern codes. Here we see Greenberg at his best, using his thorough familiarity with Mesopotamian culture and literature in the service of an overriding theological and ethical message: In contrast to other cultures of the ancient Near East, leniency of punishment for property theft in the Bible is coupled with stringency in punishment for murder, because of the unique value the Bible places on human life. Not only do we learn something valuable about the biblical world, but we gain insight into one of the basic values which the Bible has given to the western world. Greenberg the critical scholar was unwilling to abandon the Bible to the status of being no more than a stage in the development of the ideas of Western civilization. Rather, he demanded that we read the biblical text as an indicator of values which are very much a part of our present world.⁵

My first encounter with Jacob Milgrom’s work was his famous article on the biblical Hattat sacrifice.⁶ Here Milgrom argued convincingly that, while the purpose of the sacrifice was to purge the sanctuary of contagion, this impurity did not result from demonic pollution, but was caused by human sin. By showing how the section of the sanctuary where the priest sprinkled the cleansing blood corresponded to the seriousness of the sin, he demonstrated that purity was directly tied to the behavior of the individual and the community in a dynamic sense. Most important here was the ethical dimension: Human sin has a direct effect on the situation of the sanctuary and, through that, on the nature of the community’s connection with the divine. Through his remarkable insight I came to understand that what I had perceived as dry ritual activity had a powerful moral dimension, that the behavior of the priest was closely tied to the moral state of the people. In Milgrom’s eyes the state of the sanctuary was an indicator of the ritual and ethical condition of the community, and he used the image of Oscar Wilde’s “Picture of Dorian Gray” to illustrate this beautifully: Just as the true state of Dorian Gray was reflected only in his portrait, so too the results of sin might not be perceptible on the communal “body” of Israel, but the physical state of the sanctuary functioned as a barometer of the moral health of the community.⁷

In Greenberg’s brief meditation on the essentials of Jewish scholarship, he lists three essential things:

- Humility...that entails modesty and lack of dogmatism.
- Respect for the text expressed in a systematic search for its “truth”, in the universal-human sense as well as the particularistically Jewish.

⁴ Reprinted in the collection of his essays mentioned in note 1, pp. 25-41

⁵ Greenberg continued this trend throughout his career, writing extensively about the teaching of the Bible in the Israeli school system, as well as its place in Israeli society at large. See the collection of his essays in Hebrew ‘*Al Hamiqra Ve’al Hayahadut*, (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984).

⁶ “The Function of the Hattat Sacrifice”, *Tarbitz* 40 (1970):1-8 (Hebrew).

⁷ See his article “Israel’s Sanctuary: The Priestly ‘Picture of Dorian Gray’”, *Revue Biblique* 83 (1976):390-99.

- A sense of responsibility towards a community whose members, the scholars' brethren, await their disclosure of the Scriptural message.⁸

In all three of these areas Moshe Greenberg and Jacob Milgrom were outstanding examples, and we mourn their loss deeply. Biblical scholarship – and the Jewish world at large – is impoverished by their passing. We may find some consolation in the fact that they raised up many students and disciples who will carry on their work and expand upon their vision of biblical learning.

George Savran
Senior Lecturer,
Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies

⁸ Greenberg in the collected essays mentioned in n. 1, p. 7