ADVOCATES OF HUMAN SPIRITUAL RIGHTS: Theodor Herzl Gaster

Theodor Gaster. ARCHIVE PHOTO

Even if the Torah be correctly expounded by prophet and teacher, men, it was held, can and will receive it only if they be correctly attuned. And that attunement comes—if we may mix the metaphor—through inner "enlightenment." . . . The acquisition of that light, however, was not attributed to any sudden, spontaneous act of grace. Rather it was the result of man's own voluntary exercise. . . . The choice of using it or ignoring it had been left, in the case of man, to his individual will. If he heeded the gift, he achieved harmony with the eternal cosmic scheme and broke the trammels of his mortality. Automatically, he was embraced in the communion of eternal things; he became one with the great forces of the universe, with what we would call Nature, and with the non-mortal beings of the celestial realm-—the "holy ones" who stood for ever in direct converse with God. He achieved, in short, what mystics term the "unitive state."

It was this state that the members of the community claimed

> *for themselves. This was the ultimate goal of their entire spiritual adventure; the aim and **raison d' tre** of the Torah and of the disciplined life which it enjoined. They held that by virtue of their "enlightenment" they were members not only of the consecrated earthly brotherhood but **eo ipso** of the Eternal Communion. . . . This is . . . the sound mystic sense that, given the right spiritual posture, given the victory over that darkness which is set before him along with the light, man may live even on earth in a dimension of eternity. — T. H. Gaster, Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation, pp. 6–7*

Theodor Herzl Gaster (1906–1992), a scholar of comparative folklore, had an academic career that spanned five decades. He was one of the world's most distinguished Hebraists and an authority on the intertestamental period, from which the Dead Sea Scrolls derive. His father, a recognized scholar of Samaritan literature and biblical studies, went blind when Gaster was a boy, and the boy became responsible for reading books out loud to keep his father abreast of scholarship, an experience that heightened Gaster's interest in language, scholarship, and mythology. In his youth he studied Greek, Latin, and archaeology at the University of London; in 1943 he received his PhD from Columbia. During his academic career, Gaster wrote ten major books and contributed numerous articles to periodicals, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. Of the ten books, two were translations, *The Oldest Stories in the World* (1952) and *Dead Sea Scriptures in English* (1956), and five dealt explicitly with Jewish myth, legend, and folklore—all focused on the traditions of the Near East.

Like his contemporary Joseph Campbell, Theodor Gaster had a gift for storytelling, and he applied his historical and linguistic acumen to the texts and societies of the early Hittites, Canaanites, and Hebrews. Unlike Campbell, who saw myth as a story from which the modern-day reader may gain some insight, Gaster saw myth as a testament to a different mind-

set. Gaster's goal was to understand myths in the context of the time in which they were created. All words, he said, are only translations of the thoughts behind them. Gaster gave us a clue to the deep significance this statement had for him when he wrote his commentary on a fragmentary text from the Dead Sea Scrolls:

> *The interpretation rests on the device . . . of reading further meaning into a text by mentally correlating it with other passages in which the same words are used in different contexts.*

This, he said, is the way ancient words were interpreted and elaborated by the authors of the Scrolls and is a device of rabbinic tradition. Gaster might also have said that this statement serves to describe his own scholastic method as well.

Gaster was able to work in twenty-nine languages and dialects, an ability that enabled him to amass the cross-cultural parallels of whatever he was working on from the original sources. Gaster considered Sir James G. Frazer, the author of *The Golden Bough* and of *Folklore in the Old Testament*, to be his "great predecessor" whose "disjointed disquisitions" on the Old Testament he, Gaster, was able to bring to complete coverage (*The New Golden Bough*, 1959). Yet Gaster recognized that he did so "by standing on the master's shoulders" and by applying Frazer's method of comprehensive comparison. Gaster's published researches—his books—are each in their own way intended to be exhaustive. Gaster worked from a card file that he began to compile in 1934. The file had run to seventeen thousand items by the time he wrote his last major work, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament.* This last book, published in 1969, was, in his words

> *an attempt to gather into one place all that can be derived from Comparative Folklore and mythology for the*

> *interpretation of the Old Testament. . . . What I have done, then, is to go through the Old Testament from cover to cover and pick out, verse by verse, anything on which Comparative Folklore or mythology may throw light. In this effort, I have kept my sights not only on elucidating the overt sense of the text but also on recovering by the aid of such material the undercurrents of thought and the subliminal elements of the writers' minds.*

Of his method of interpretation in this project he had this to say:

> *In **interpreting** . . . I have generally used the control of **context**, choosing that explanation which best accords with the acknowledged tenor and meaning of other usages with which it is ceremonially associated.*

Gaster employed a similar method to produce his translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. With *Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* his purpose was to provide a complete and reliable translation of all the principal and intelligibly preserved documents retrieved from the Dead Sea caves, together with the related *Zadokite Document*, which was discovered nearly fifty years earlier in an old synagogue in Cairo. Gaster concerned himself only with what the scrolls themselves had to say, not with what was being said about them. In this way, he provided us with his most valuable contribution: his interpretation of the Dead Sea Scriptures, an expression made in both his careful translation of the Scrolls and the considered commentaries on the Qumran Community that he was able to draw from them. Gaster recognized that the scriptural passages that were interwoven in all the texts of the scrolls by their authors were often understood by them in an uncommon way. He consulted ancient versions of Old Testament texts in the original languages in the attempt to recover from those sources any traces of the tradition that the authors may have

followed, and he found in them clues to expressions in the scrolls that would otherwise be obscure. He combed through New Testament texts to find the affinities there, and he compared the practices of the spiritual Community described in the scrolls with the practices and traditions of the *edah* Community of the early Church in Palestine, of the Mandeans, of the Samaritans, and of the Manichaeans—all in order to approach the same understanding of the words of the scrolls as the authors themselves had. Gaster earned significant recognition in the late 1940s when he was among the first scholars to examine the newly discovered scrolls. His *Dead Sea Scriptures*, one of the first English translations of the Dead Sea Scrolls, he single-handedly edited and translated from facsimiles of the original scrolls at a feverish pace, taking only thirty days, during which he consumed vast amounts of hot tea and wrapped his head in cold towels to ward off sleep.

Dead Sea Scriptures sold over 200,000 copies from the first edition in 1956 to the last edition in 1976. Today it is out of print. Perhaps this fact is significant. A comment he makes in the final paragraph of the preface to *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament,* his last book, about the difficulties he had faced throughout his career is telling:

> *I have had no help from colleagues in preparing this book, and have indeed been constrained, over these long years, to plow a lonely furrow.*

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