The Book of the People
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The present book is an outgrowth of my work on *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. That project was launched by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) in 1966 and completed fifteen years later with the publication of the one-volume edition in 1981. The five separate volumes appeared from 1974-1983, and new editions and other offshoots of the first edition continue to appear. Thus the project is an ongoing one, and one to which its sponsors rightly attach considerable importance. The project enjoyed the guidance of successive directors of the Union’s Department of Education beginning with Rabbi Alexander Schindler (1966-8), now President of the Union, and ending with Rabbi Leonard Schoolman (1975-1986). It was ably seconded by various Chairmen of the Commission on Education including Rabbis Jacob Rudin, Roland Gittelsohn and Robert Kahn. And it enjoyed the devoted labors of the Union’s Publications Department, of whom Abe Segal and Josette Knight deserve special mention.

The structure of the Commentary and the manner by which its authorship, format, layout and relationship to other ongoing projects of the Union were gradually determined form a fascinating story which deserves its own presentation in another context. Here I would like to confine myself to a few remarks on my own part in the process.

My role in general was not just to prepare the introductory essays, but to serve as consultant to the authors of the commentary. I took this duty rather seriously, and for all of the fifteen years devoted countless

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1 Of these the latest is a translation of the Commentary into Hebrew by Aviv Melzer. Vol. 1 (Genesis) appeared in 1988 under the imprint of Hebrew Union College (Jerusalem).

2 The remarks which follow are taken in part from an address “Reflections on the new Reform Torah Commentary” presented to the Conference on Reform Judaism and Religious Authenticity held at Yale University on April 24, 1983.
hours to reading every line of every draft of each volume, including an entire manuscript for Exodus (by David Polish) which was not in the end adopted for publication – though parts of my 23-page single-spaced critique found their way into the one which eventually was! Nor were my comments limited to adding the Assyriological or other comparative data familiar to me from my preoccupation with the languages, literatures and history of the Ancient Near East. Rather I conceived it as part of my task to bring the commentary in line with the ongoing findings of critical Biblical scholarship as reported in the periodical literature, the monographs, and the papers presented at learned societies. It appeared to me that these findings were a necessary complement and corrective to those catalogued in the older commentaries, which were assiduously combed by the authors themselves. Though on the one hand representing the considered judgement of former generations and tested in the crucible of time, these older findings on the other hand were often enough superseded by more recent insights in a field which tends to move fast. Finally, I had frequent occasion to inject considerations based on my general acquaintance with Jewish law and lore.

As to the more specific characterization of the process by which the commentary came into being, and my role in that process, one has to distinguish rather sharply between the Leviticus commentary and the other four volumes. For its author, the late Bernard J. Bamberger, was a very different sort of scholar from W. Gunther Plaut. Immensely erudite in his own right, Rabbi Bamberger saw his task somehow as reconciling classical Biblical criticism with traditional Rabbinic exegesis. When applied to that single book of the whole Bible which on the face of it is probably least congenial to the modern temper, this meant that all the strange cultic prescriptions of Leviticus were likely to sound even more alien through the prism of rabbinic legislation for which they formed the basis, or of Wellhausenist doctrines of religious evolution, for which they represented the constitution of a post-exilic theocracy. Personally, I took a diametrically opposite stance. I saw it as the task of "a modern commentary" to bring the text closer to our times, striving on the one hand to recover its original meaning rather than that put on it by later, intervening ages, and on the other to highlight within the text such portions as still directly speak to current issues: the imperishable ethical mores of chapter 19, for example, or the burning concern for social justice addressed by the laws of the jubilee in chapter 25.

Partly as a result of these differences in temperament and approach, Rabbi Bamberger and I "agreed to differ," and in his preface to the Leviticus volume of the 5-volume edition (1979), he graciously
acknowledged both my dissent from and my contributions to his formulations. In fact, he probably used no more than 20 percent of my extensive comments, and then only in the sense of a stimulant to rethinking and reformulating his explanations rather than of a verbatim dependence on mine. Let me illustrate by reference to the double Parasha\(^3\) which covers chapters 16-18 and 19-20 respectively, units that are hard to reconcile with critical assessments of the book's internal structure. According to the critics, chapter 17 begins a discrete section within the priestly narrative (P) sometimes referred to as the Holiness Code, or H for short, which continues through chapter 26. Bamberger duly identified this section as Part VI of the book, and entitled it "The Law of Holiness." But in commenting on its crucial opening chapter, he adhered to the late date for H which is a legacy of nineteenth century Biblical criticism and now widely disputed. In his original drafts, he had written (among other things): "The author of this commentary accepts, with important modifications, much of the older critical theory, and regards P (including H) as exilic or post-exilic in its present form. Such a position compels us to regard Chapter 17 as an attempt to repeal Deut. 12.20ff." In response, I had commented: "This problem should be reviewed in light of, and with reference to, the discussion of sacrifice and the slaughtering and eating of meat in Genesis, esp. the Noahide laws.\(^4\) As pointed out repeatedly there, the Biblical emphasis is on absolving the slayer or consumer of any associated guilt. This is consistent with the supreme value placed on human life in the Pentateuch, as against either animal life or property (cf. M. Greenberg, "Some Postulates" in Y. Kaufmann Jubilee Volume, reprinted in Goldin, Jewish Expression).\(^5\) The contrast is with Ancient Near Eastern practice, which tended to restrict meat eating to the deity and, by his dispensation, to those permitted to share his table (reflections of this remain in 1 Sam. 2:13-16) by partaking of what the deity 'left over.' The Biblical provisions are not contradictory if seen as varying attempts to break with Ancient Near Eastern restrictions." Bamberger's second draft took notice of this objection by inserting three paragraphs on the Noahide laws and the important explanation of the sequence of Biblical laws regarding the consumption of animal food offered by Jacob Milgrom in 1971 (and, we may add, elaborated by the same author and by others subsequently). But he considered this view only to reject it and to restate his own position, albeit in somewhat more

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\(^3\)A parasha is a section of the Pentateuch read during a given week. My illustration was based on the reading of that week, Ahare-mot/Kedoshim.

\(^4\)On these cf. meantime the exhaustive study by David Novak (1983).

\(^5\)Greenberg has meantime returned to this theme in 1986.
The alternative possibility is that our Chapter is post-Deuteronomic and is an attempt to repeal the Deuteronomic rule. This view has been held by many of the earlier critics who regarded P – including H – as exilic or post-exilic. The present writer has already indicated his view that these codes provide much ancient material but were completed in their present form no earlier than the time of the exile. He then went beyond "many of the earlier critics" to restate his own, idiosyncratic extension of the theory, namely that Leviticus 17 represented a temporary abrogation of Deuteronomy, an early post-exilic reform intended by those who returned from Babylonian exile to discourage pagan practices among the peasants they had left behind, and "perhaps also to increase the prestige and income of . . . the small shrine which had replaced the Grand Temple of Solomon" – a reform soon enough replaced again by the Deuteronomic provision.6

Clearly I differ. A measure of that difference can be read out of my introductory essay (see below, chapter VI). Further research has tended to strengthen the analogies and weaken the contrasts between the Israelite and Mesopotamian "concepts of consumption" that I refer to there. Israel, too, regarded the altar as the "table of the Lord" (Malachi 1:4; cf. 1:12), as pointed out in detail by Chanan Brichto.7 And Sumerian mythology too, as newly revealed by a text in the Yale Babylonian Collection, apparently regarded man as originally destined for vegetarianism and switching to meat consumption only after the Flood and then only in the context of an elaborate ritual slaughter complete with sacrificial meal at which the chief deities consumed the best parts in order, presumably, to legitimate and sanctify the human consumption of animal meat.8

If I may turn now to the work of Rabbi Plaut on the remaining four books of Moses, it was very different. Plaut's long years as a homiletician and prayer-book and Bible commentator made him much more receptive to the needs of the contemporary congregant and, I may add, to my particular suggestions. Of these, I daresay that some 80 percent found their way into his final text, often with little or no change. This applied equally on all levels – the comparative material from the Ancient Near East, the inner-Biblical data, the post-Biblical and particularly the liturgical employment and understanding of the Biblical text, and finally its absorption into the cultural heritage (literary, artistic, musical or otherwise) of the Western world, Jewish

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7Brichto 1976.
8Hallo 1983b and 1987b.
and Gentile, in general. I could illustrate this by innumerable specific instances but prefer instead to use a more general example, the structure of Genesis.

Early in the project, it was decided that the traditional division into Parshiyoth⁹ would have to be replaced or modified in favor of units at once short enough to carry the burden of a weekly Torah service or study session as augmented by a fairly extensive Commentary, and at the same time roughly coterminous with the pericopes or other literary units identified and isolated by modern critical scholarship. In this spirit, Rabbi Plaut accepted an outline of Genesis which I substituted for the one he had originally proposed. My outline, in its essentials, remains the basis for the printed version, and served to some extent as a model for the subsequent volumes as well. In essence, it recreates a kind of triennial cycle of weekly readings, i.e. it envisages the completion of the readings of the entire Pentateuch in three years (rather than one). Wherever possible, it respects the traditional annual cycle of Parshiyoth, but breaks each of them up into three (or more!) separate units. The traditional divisions were exhaustively documented by two great scholars of Hebrew Union College, Jacob Mann and Isaiah Sonne, in "The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue: a study in the cycles of the reading from Torah and Prophets, as well as from Psalms and in the Structure of the Midrashic homilies" (2 vols., 1940-1966). This provides the rationale for the traditional divisions and subdivisions but also catalogues the numerous variant traditions, thus justifying departures from them when they cannot be reconciled with divisions arrived at on critical grounds.

But it should be noted that we have achieved a more significant correlation or reconciliation. For the book of Genesis displays an internal structure of its own which is inherent in the text itself and independent of and prior to the Rabbinic structure for lectionary purposes. I am referring to the ten recurrent formulas involving the word toledot which in modern Hebrew means "history," in older Biblical translations appears as "genealogies" and in our commentary, following the New Jewish Version, but more consistently, is rendered by "lines." Following my outline, we have interpreted these formulas as headings for all the material that follows, and used it to identify the four major parts of Genesis. Those are "the lines of heaven, earth and primeval man" (including Adam, Noah and Shem, 2:4-11:26), "the line of Terach" (11:27-25:18), "the line of Isaac" (25:19-37:1) and "the line of Jacob" (37:2-50). The minor subdivisions representing the sidelines not ancestral to Israel can also be so identified: the table of nations in

⁹Plural of parasha, for which see note 3, above.
chapter 10; the genealogy of Ishmael in 25:12-18 and that of Esau in 36:1-37:1. Though Plaut was not willing to follow me in regard to these, their status as structural elements in the final (possibly priestly) editorial reworking of the material has been vindicated by recent scholarship, notably a new study on the Toledot-formula and the literary structure of the priestly expansion of the Pentateuch. Thus the Commentary has here to some extent anticipated the results of the latest critical scholarship, as elsewhere it attempts to reflect and incorporate it or at least confront it. And it has here recaptured the original intention of the final redaction of the Hebrew text as elsewhere it has striven to preserve the understanding of the text arrived at by the intervening centuries of Rabbinic exegesis, liturgical use or artistic reinterpretation.

In conclusion, it is fair to ask to what extent the new commentary is specifically a product of Reform Judaism. The many characteristics already outlined so far should go some way toward answering that question. But I can best appeal to an outsider’s more objective assessment for an answer. The Commentary has been widely and on the whole very favorably reviewed. Indeed, Edward L. Greenstein, who wrote one of the few mildly critical reviews, told me personally that he did so at the specific request of the UAHC, which was concerned to find a "balance" of sorts among the reviews appearing in the Journal of Reform Judaism, published under its auspices (Summer 1982). One of the most thoughtful and enthusiastic critiques was published in Commentary (February 1982); Robert Alter, the distinguished specialist in comparative literature, entitled his essay "Reform Judaism Comes of Age," and saw the new commentary as nothing less than a breakthrough for the movement as a whole: a willingness to learn from the past and from all parts of the Jewish tradition coupled with a determination to create a thoroughly modern respect for the Torah, i.e., an appreciation of its abiding worth without an obligatory and too often unacceptable insistence on its being the literal, revealed word of God. To the extent that the Commentary has achieved this double mission, it is worthy of replacing Hertz in the pews and libraries of the English-speaking world.

In the pages that follow, the introductory essays which I wrote for the Commentary have been updated and expanded to some extent to bring them in line with the latest findings. And their utility has, it is hoped, been greatly enhanced by systematic cross-references to the text

10Tengström 1981.
11My thanks to UAHC for permission to reproduce them here as revised, and to reproduce the maps of the Commentary (pp. 22, 74, 116, 168, 208).
selections in Chapter X. These selections formed the basis for many of the assertions made in the essays; by assembling them conveniently within the confines of one book, it is intended that readers will be able to form their own judgement as to their relevance. In this, they will be aided by annotations, judiciously chosen to illuminate essential details of each text selection. In addition, each selection is identified with the Pentateuchal passage to which it is germane; readers are urged to read these passages in conjunction with the selections.

The five essays on the Pentateuch and Ancient Near Eastern Literature are prefaced by three others newly written for this volume. The first deals with its titular subject. The second briefly outlines some of the principal approaches to Biblical literature pursued in modern critical scholarship. The third presents my own approach in somewhat greater detail, illustrating it from the entire Biblical corpus. A subsequent chapter furnishes a thumbnail sketch of Biblical history from a contextual perspective.

"The Book of the People" was the title I had originally proposed for the Commentary itself – inspired, to some extent, by the presence on its original advisory board – and a commanding presence it was – of the late Mordecai Kaplan, the champion of Jewish peoplehood. In a sense, then, this volume may stand as a tribute to his memory. It is dedicated with love to the twin sources of my continuing inspiration.

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12 This essay appears, in slightly revised form, also in The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context 3, ed. by William W. Hallo, Bruce W. Jones and Gerald L. Mattingly (Mellen Press, 1990) ch. 1.