MAURICE DAVID GOLDMAN– EXTRAORDINARY LINGUIST

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For twelve years from 1945 to 1957 Maurice David Goldman held the chair of Semitic Studies at the University of Melbourne. He was recognised as an extraordinary linguist. An article about him that appeared in *People* magazine in 1952[1] was headed 'A Man Who Talks With 30 Tongues', the subheading was 'Dr Maurice Goldman, of Melbourne, can also read 20 other plain and fancy languages'. Given time, he could decipher almost any language put in front of him with the aid of his vast knowledge of word roots and derivations. When he left the Censorship Office at the end of the war it was said that three men were needed to replace him.

Goldman was born on 13 January 1898, in Kolo, Poland, and had a traditional Jewish education under his father's supervision. His father was Arieh Leib Goldmann, a merchant, and his mother was Golda, nee Kozminska.[2] He already spoke five or six languages fluently before entering high school, and many others came later. He retained a competence in rabbinic sources and quoted them in his lectures, though his religious views veered away from orthodoxy and in Melbourne he joined the liberal Temple Beth Israel.

After *gymnasium* (high school) studies he entered the medical school at Warsaw University but he preferred the linguistic seminars which he first attended as an intellectual hobby. Before completing his third year as a medical student he moved to the University of Berlin where he studied Arabic, Islamic culture and Oriental languages, and gained a Doctorate of Philosophy in 1925 for a thesis, later published, on the history of the Hebrew language in the Middle Ages. He became an expert in the languages and literatures of all the Middle Eastern peoples and this knowledge added to the array of tongues known to the Continental intelligentsia of the time. He lectured in Semitic Studies at a number of German academies, becoming in due course a lecturer in Hebrew and Aramaic at the Jewish Teachers' College (*Lehranstalt der Juedischen Gemeinde zu*

Berlin) and lecturer in Islam, Arab history and Ethiopic language at the *Hochschule*, the non-orthodox rabbinic seminary. Apart from a five-volume Hebrew textbook entitled *Hebraeisch*[3] which is referred to later in this paper, he published during these years a Hebrew translation of and commentary on the Ethiopic version of the pseudepigraphic, *Book of Jubilees.*[4]

Goldman was amongst those whose Jewish cultural activity – pioneered by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber - played an important part in maintaining the morale of German Jewry in the fateful 1930s. He was no appeaser. He spoke his mind (as he later did in Australia), and in 1938 had to leave Germany in somewhat of a hurry. He had given a lecture on Mohammed in which he drew some rather witty parallels, though only by inference, between certain weaknesses, which the *Fuehrer* seemed to share with the Prophet. It was inevitable that he would become a target of the Gestapo. He left Germany on a Polish passport only hours before they came to arrest him and ended up in Australia, where his sister Mrs Lubranizki was living in Horsham, Victoria. He reached Melbourne on 2 January 1939, and like many refugees from the Continent faced a culture shock and a dearth of academic openings. He took on some private pupils, was a teacher at the then recently established Liberal Synagogue and later taught at the Bialik Hebrew School and became involved in the Talmud Torah that eventually became the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation.

From time to time, beginning in 1942, he gave guest lectures in Hebrew and Arabic at Melbourne University, but his paid occupation was in the military censorship office, where he allowed no document to defeat him. If need be he would quickly learn a new language in order to decipher a letter than came onto his desk. However, learning languages as far as he was concerned was never something merely perfunctory or pragmatic. His university colleague Professor Alan R. Chisholm – who thought Goldman was 'a gift from heaven' to Australian academia - pointed out that 'Goldman never learnt a language without also mastering its history and literature'.[5]

The logical setting for a scholar like Goldman was a tertiary teaching post, but the Jewish community had no institute for advanced studies (and little interest in establishing one) and Melbourne University had no Semitics faculty. The story of the emergence of the Semitic Studies Department resulting from the financial sponsorship of Abraham Hyam Sicree, and his brother Lazarus, is told in my article in Volume 5 Part 1 of this Journal.[6] In his history of Mount Scopus College, Benzion Patkin described how Abraham Sicree began to show an interest in Jewish affairs in the 1930s and 1940s, intensifying after his father's death in 1944. The

Chair funded by Abraham and Lazarus Sicree with a gift of ten thousand pounds gave the University a means of offering an appointment to Goldman, but the official wheels had to turn at their own pace before the department could come into being, and in theory it was always possible that a rival candidate might come forward and be appointed instead of Goldman.

The events were spearheaded by Professor Chisholm, the then dean of the Faculty of Arts, who regarded Goldman as 'a man of genius'[7] but knew he had to tread warily. It was not only that this was a time of turmoil in the Middle East and some feared that creating a Chair of Semitic Studies and possibly appointing a Jewish professor would be construed as taking sides between Arabs and Jews, but there was a range of views on the campus about where the university's priorities should lie. Professor Chisholm was adamant that Semitic languages and literatures had a role to play in the university's cultural offerings (and urged that more should be done to promote Hebrew within the Jewish community) and he insisted that he was promoting the university's own interests by encouraging the establishment of a Semitics department.

Chisholm knew that the proposed Chair would need to be advertised and other scholars had to be considered, but he was quite certain that Goldman would prove to be the best candidate for the position. He had this feeling from their first conversation (and he devoted a whole chapter to Goldman in his book, *Men Were My Milestones*). He wrote, 'Half an hour's conversation made it clear to me that it would be a disaster for the University to miss the chance of getting a scholar of Goldman's eminence.'[8] His words proved prophetic. Despite a number of overseas applicants, Goldman was appointed in May 1945 and the University conferred on him a Master of Arts degree. The Sicree brothers' funding was only for five years but thereafter the University accepted full responsibility for the department.

Goldman soon became a well-known figure within the University and beyond it, and was involved amongst other activities in the establishment of the Australian Humanities Research Council. His conviviality and friendship with other senior academics was seen on many days of the week when he brought colleagues to Cohen's kosher restaurant in Drummond Street, Carlton, opposite Herzl Hall (the headquarters of Habonim, the Zionist youth movement) to acquaint them with Jewish food. At home he loved to entertain, and his guests delighted in his housekeeper's culinary talents (though on occasion the catering was in the hands of Leon Gurewicz), as well as in his wine cellar.

Goldman began his professorial work with a visit to the Middle

East to investigate educational trends and textbooks, and embarked energetically on his teaching responsibilities. The department's courses covered not only Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic but the whole range of Semitic languages. Because student numbers were relatively low Goldman had a heavy burden of classroom teaching. Almost his only assistant was a lecturer, Shalom Benzion (Benny) Gurewicz, the younger son of Rabbi J. L. Gurewicz of the Carlton United Hebrew Congregation, one of the few Australian *ge'onim*.[9] Benny himself was a polymath scholar who later, after parting company with Goldman and the university, had a sheaf of careers including lawyer, businessman, teacher, translator, journalist, and even caterer.

Professor Goldman was an unforgettable teacher. A short, heavy, ponderous figure (he admitted to about 14 stone but this must have been an under-estimate, and he certainly loved to eat), he had an impassive poker-face (Professor Chisholm speaks of his 'massive head and heavy-lidded eyes')[10] and could and often did over-awe young students. I have to admit that from the moment of my oral examination in Matriculation Hebrew I was scared of him and in my early years at university put off enrolling in his department for certain Arts subjects which I needed to combine with my law studies. In the end I had the courage to take his courses in Hebrew and Aramaic in 1957, but I was not to know that he was seriously ill and would not be able to complete the year.

Goldman had a wonderfully dry wit and even in the course of a lecture on a technical point of academic linguistics he could introduce – with all the appearance of meaning it seriously – some preposterous comment that he found it hard not to enjoy. He told us, for instance, that the letter *tet* never follows *gimmel* – with one exception, and in that case the combination proved disastrous. What was the combination? *Gimmel tet - get*, a divorce. He had an ancient Vauxhall car which was once stolen and found next morning miles away. Not long afterwards his Arabic class were met with a passage for translation in their examination paper, telling of the theft of 'a lovely and beautiful black Mehri she-camel' with the strength of fourteen valiant steeds and the speed of the desert wind. Her food was pure oil, her drink a liquid taken from the innermost bowels of the earth and purified especially for her. Her name? 'Baxu-Hallu', the nearest Arabic spelling of Vauxhall. Professor Chisholm recalled that at the height of tension between Arabs and Jews there was a high-level Jewish communal dinner in Melbourne at which Goldman was asked to say Grace, and he did so in Arabic![11]

Despite his impish sense of humour, however, Goldman was less than amused to hear what he considered to be incorrect and ungrammatical Hebrew spoken in the streets of Israel. The tables

were turned when he told an Israeli taxi driver the address to which he wanted to be taken, and the driver rebuked him for what he considered his passenger's defective Hebrew!

Goldman's approach to language teaching was revolutionary. Already in Germany he had written a five-volume textbook entitled *Hebraeisch,* (Hebrew), published in Hebrew and German in both Berlin and *Eretz Israel* (the Land of Israel) in the 1930s. It went through several editions and sold thousands of copies. He systematised the language and its grammar on the basis of its linguistic structure and by the time he resumed academic teaching in Australia he had uncovered further features of Hebrew which he entitled *The Melbourne Rules*. It could well have been that he thought of translating and revising *Hebraeisch* but his illness and early death made this impossible. He did, however, utilise many of the linguistic charts in the original book for the purposes of his Melbourne lectures. He revised and expanded some of the material for a series of slides entitled *Principles of Hebrew Grammar*, made by the University's Department of Visual Aids.

His colleague Richard H. Samuel, the Professor of German, wrote:

> Professor Goldman's particular strength lay in the combination of solid scholarship and lively teaching. He evolved, and this is perhaps his most important contribution in the field of learning and academic teaching, a special approach to and method of teaching foreign languages, which sprang from his enormous knowledge of comparative philology. By reducing complicated grammatical structures in various languages to their fundamental historical bases, and by using novel visual aids, he made it simple, easy and enjoyable for students to learn and acquire ever widening knowledge of even remote languages and dialects.[12]

Many of Goldman's students were earnest Christians planning to enter the ministry but it was not necessarily just with them in mind that he was amongst the founders of the Fellowship for Biblical Studies, which he chaired for some years. The Fellowship gave him the opportunity of sharing with and influencing Christian and Jewish Bible scholars, thus playing a constructive role in interfaith dialogue based on sound knowledge and not just vague general goodwill. The initial meeting took place at his home on 11 July 1950, when it was agreed to establish 'a society devoted solely to scientific research of biblical and related matters'. The foundation members apart from Goldman himself were Professor G. Calvert Barber,

Professor E. C. Burleigh, Rev Alec Fraser, S.B. Gurewicz, Professor J.D.A. Macnicol, Professor Hector Maclean and Rabbi Dr Herman Sanger – five Christians and two Jews. The first public meeting was on 25 October 1950, when Goldman gave a paper on the Isaiah manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, controversially arguing that the material is no older than the second century C.E. He was convinced that careless copyists had wrought considerable damage to Biblical texts and created linguistic impossibilities.

This paper was published in the first issue of the Fellowship's *Australian Biblical Review* – though it must be said that lack of funds meant that in its early years the journal had to be roneoed and was consequently rather hard to read. For a considerable time Goldman used the *Review* as the main avenue of his writings, which ranged from lexicographical analyses to a series on Jeremiah and, characteristically, included an essay on *Humour in the Hebrew Bible*. This latter paper was his presidential address to the Fellowship in 1952. An example of his thesis is what he saw as the constant resort of the author of the Book of Ruth to puns on names. He notes that not only Old Testament authors but also the writers of the New Testament utilise wordplays to make their point.[13]

He represented the Fellowship at the 1953 International Congress of Old Testament Scholars in Copenhagen and wrote a report for the *Australian Biblical Review,* highlighting not only the scholarly papers at the conference but the valuable opportunities the occasion presented for personal and academic networking. Both in his writings and in his comments on papers read at Fellowship meetings he was robust in his rejection of what he considered untenable assertions made by other scholars – for example, on the nature and message of the Book of Ruth. He was convinced that commentators, copyists and translators often misunderstood the Biblical texts. His corrections of their renderings formed the basis for a series of lexicographical notes, which he offered at various meetings of the Fellowship and later published in the *A.B.R.* He eventually became disenchanted with the Fellowship and was heard to make the caustic comment that when he ceased being president, the organisation would lose any Jewish content.

His writings included a Hebrew primer for Jewish children. Entitled *Limda Yaldi*, (Learn, My Child), it was sponsored by Temple Beth Israel and published by Freelance Press in Melbourne in 1955, carrying a commendation by the Temple's senior minister, Rabbi Dr. Herman Sanger. It was one of the few Hebrew textbooks ever produced by Australian Jewry. However, the book, with its whimsical illustrations by Joe Greenberg, was criticised by some for including pictures of boys without head covering and not giving the lessons

more religious content. Others said that a serious academic should not be writing children's books. Still it must be said that Goldman had a fine insight into a child's mind and the contents of *Limda Yaldi* were carefully worked out, though possibly the teachers who used the book in their classes were not quite sure of what teaching methods the author expected of them. *Limda Yaldi* was used at the Temple Beth Israel classes, but outside the Temple it did not prove a great success and these days hardly anyone remembers it.

Goldman was an active member of the Zionist movement and B'nai B'rith and in the 1940s served on the education committee of the Victorian Jewish Advisory Board, the forerunner of the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, for whom he gave a number of adult education lectures and conducted in-service classes for Hebrew teachers. He was particularly active – and far from a 'yes' man - on the Mount Scopus College Council during the school's formative period in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and was energetically involved in the College's Hebrew syllabus committee and the selection committees for a headmaster and a director of Jewish Studies. He had misgivings about Abraham Feiglin's appointment as inaugural College principal and urged him to upgrade his qualifications by pursuing advanced studies in Hebrew. Benzion Patkin, in his book on the history of the College, describes Goldman as a close colleague, especially at the frequent times of controversy, and he valued Goldman's support.[14] Nonetheless Goldman eventually felt that he had no place at Mount Scopus.

Involved in – and often highly critical of - everything that happened in the Jewish community, he also wrote articles for the Jewish press in English, Hebrew and Yiddish. He had begun work on an Ethiopic dictionary but did not live long enough to complete it.

Temple Beth Israel was the venue of his funeral service when he died of cancer in September 1957. He was subsequently cremated at Springvale. During the funeral service, students whose Jewish orthodoxy prevented them from entering a reform house of worship stood outside the Temple building in Alma Road, St. Kilda, in tribute to their teacher. It should be recorded that some of his students were or became orthodox rabbis. In my own case my rather pedantic concern for correct Hebrew grammar is definitely thanks to him, and I might add that I utilised my notes of his Aramaic lectures when, many years later, I taught Aramaic grammar at the University of Sydney.

Goldman's wife Fela (nee Hermeon) had died in Germany in 1932. They had no children. His residuary estate was left to the University of Melbourne. An article about him in the *Australian Jewish News* in 2006[15] rightly called him 'a linguistic giant' and reminisced about his feats and foibles.

THANKS

ENDNOTES

1. *People,* 13 February 1952.
2. See also Nina Christesen, 'Goldman, Maurice David (1898–1957)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (National Centre of Biography, Australian National University), http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/goldman-maurice-david-10319/text18263, accessed 8 April 2012.
3. M.D. Goldman, *Hebraeisch* (Berlin-Charlottenburg/Tel Aviv: Verlag Sefathenu, 1933-1934). Thousands of copies were sold – part of the Jewish cultural upsurge in Germany in the 1930s – and some volumes were revised and reprinted several times.
4. On the Book of Jubilees – *Sefer HaYovelim* – see *Encyclopedia Judaica*, first ed., 1972, vol. 10, cols. 324-326.
5. A.R. Chisholm, *Men Were My Milestones* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1958), p. 132.
6. Raymond Apple, 'The Origins of the Semitic Studies Department, Melbourne University', *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, vol. 5, part 1 (1959), pp. 30-38.
7. Chisholm, *op. cit.*, p 126.
8. *Babel* (Modern Language Teachers' Association of Victoria), no. 6, November 1957, p. i.
9. An eminent Jewish scholar noted for wisdom and knowledge of the Talmud.
10. Chisholm, *op.cit.*, p. 126.
11. Ibid, p. 132.
12. *Babel, loc. cit.*
13. The first five volumes of the *Australian Biblical Review* contained a range of contributions by Goldman. Vol. 6 reports his death.
14. Benzion Patkin, *Heritage and Tradition: The Emergence of Mount Scopus College* (Melbourne, Hawthorn, 1972).   There are many references to Goldman.
15. *Australian Jewish News*, 30 June 2006.