From Ancient Jewish Literature to Armenian Studies: A Personal Journey

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Any travel story is a record of a journey and Odysseus' great return home from Ilium is perhaps the best-known traveller's tale of all times. Today I wish to tell of my personal Odyssey from a central interest in Ancient Jewish Literature to being an Armenologist. This change did not dawn upon me in one single epiphany, or unfold in one neat, evolutionary sequence, but happened in fits and starts, in leaps forward and careful backtracking.

An interest in the Second Temple period is a likely outcome of the study of Classics and Semitics, which were my original subjects at Melbourne University. My involvement in Armenian began when I went to Harvard University in 1961 to do a doctorate in Second Temple Judaism, and among the preparatory courses that I was sent to study were Armenian, Avestan, and Pahlavi. Probably due to my teacher, Avedis Sanjian who hailed originally from Jerusalem, I developed a strong bond with Armenian, extending far beyond my actual need for it as an additional research tool for Ancient Jewish literature.

As I left Harvard in 1965, I was invited to write the commentary on the apocryphon 4 Ezra, a Jewish work written about 30 years after the destruction of the Temple for a new series, called *Hermeneia*. To do this I thought that I should be able to consult editions of this work in the various tongues in which it survived. The Armenian text needed editing, and I decided to do that. This brought me into contact with 20-odd manuscripts containing the text of its Armenian version. So, I learned very early on that behind the edited texts stood the varied forms of text preserved in

manuscripts. Which text most accurately preserved the original? What was its character? What could it teach us about 4 Ezra?

In order to understand the relationship between these text-forms, it was crucial to learn the dates of those manuscripts that were undated. Manuscripts with colophons or scribal notes, and about half of Armenian manuscripts have them, usually had a date. Others, however, did not. Their dating had to be based primarily on palaeography, the study of the type of writing. Consequently, I started to pay attention to the development of Armenian script types, *erkat'agir, bolorgir,* and *notragir*. This interest in the end led to my production of a major tool to help date Armenian writing, *The Album of Armenian Palaeography* with the collaboration of Dickran Kouymjian and Henning Lehman in 2006. Through the need to date the undated manuscripts of 4 Ezra, I had moved from the printed text to the manuscript text and from that, to the history of the script in which the manuscript was written, and eventually to the manuscript itself.

As I followed this path, I came to realise more fully that the ancient or medieval manuscripts are not just text-containers whose writing or text need to be studied. They are physical artefacts with many dimensions and should be investigated as such. This meant applying not only the philologian's accustomed arsenal of tools, but methodologies used in the natural sciences, both biological and physical, to analyse and describe physical artefacts. Such research, which is in its infancy, will yield new data teaching us about the manuscript's historical context and may teach us about how and where it was produced, where it had been stored, and other features of its history. But as I write this, it is just a dream as far as Armenian manuscripts are concerned.

In my personal pilgrimage, I reached this realisation just when the Dead Sea Scrolls took centre stage in the study of Ancient Judaism. Nira and I had been commissioned to prepare a catalogue of the additional Armenian manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin. For that, I had been reading intensely into European codicology, that aspect of manuscript study that deals with the "archaeology of the book," the physical construction of manuscripts, the disposition of their writing (called the *mis-en-page*), bindings, and further technical aspects. The Dead Sea manuscripts were scrolls but later manuscripts, both Armenian and Jewish,[1] were predominantly codices, that is, they were in book form. Subjects like the structure of the quire or gathering պրակ, the ruling of the guidelines for the script, the methods of sewing the quires together, of attaching the covers to the block, etc. all fall into the realm of codicology. For clarity, I must make explicit here that in what follows the word "manuscript" may mean either a roll or a codex. The only Armenian manuscripts regularly in scrolls are հմայիլs, amulets.

When I first started teaching at the Hebrew University in 1966, I met Malachi Beit Arie, whose great project documenting medieval Hebrew manuscript codicology and scribal technique was already underway. The sort of information that can be gleaned from such systematic and comprehensive research is large and Beit-Arie's work drew out its implications for dating, locating, and scribal techniques. For Armenian studies, unfortunately, at the systematic level codicology still remains a largely unexplored field.

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[1] Barring Torah scrolls and *megillot*. In the Armenian tradition, amulets were very often written on scrolls. See Frédéric Feydit (1986), *Amulettes de l'Arménie chrétienne*, (Bibliothèque arménienne de la fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Venice: St. Lazare), and Michael E. Stone and Nira Stone (2012), *Catalogue of the Additional Armenian Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin*, ed. Michael E. Stone, (Hebrew University Armenian Studies, 12; Leuven: Peeters).

So far then, my journey had taken me from editing an ancient Jewish work to the study of Armenian manuscripts and the texts contained in them. I had moved subsequently to the scripts in which the manuscripts were written. In order to use scripts to date manuscripts, I needed a sure yardstick with which to compare them. Because the oldest dated Armenian manuscript is of the year 862 (the Queen Mlkē Gospels in Venice), an interest in earlier dated writing took me next to the study of inscriptions. We have Armenian inscriptions from the period before 862. Because I live in this city of Jerusalem, naturally the Holy Land inscriptions particularly interested me. And events egged me on. First, political developments gave me access to the Convent of the Sts. James in 1967, and the welcome I received there was a crucial factor. My first book was actually set by hand and published by the Sts. James Press.

The second turn of fortune that stoked the fire of my interest in Armenology was the discovery of Armenian inscriptions in the Sinai Desert. This happened in the late 1970's and I made five expeditions to the Sinai at that time, until the Israeli withdrawal under the terms of the peace treaty with Egypt of 1982. I have written a travel book about the Sinai, still unpublished for I seek a suitable publisher. It describes my travels in the footsteps of Armenian pilgrims and the search for the inscriptions they left. On the very first expedition, I reached a great sandstone rock in Eastern Sinai to which I had been directed. There, suddenly, I saw the name ՆԱԹԱՆ written in Mesropian Erkatagir and I knew in my bones that it was ancient, very ancient. Altogether, I gathered and published about 120 graffiti from various sites in the Sinai. And they are ancient.

Some years later, Dr. Joan Taylor, a New Zealander who worked on ancient Christian places of worship, told me of Armenian inscriptions that had been revealed

in the course of building the new Latin Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. I went to Nazareth immediately, and saw old, old graffiti scratched in the plaster of stones discovered under the mosaic floor of a Byzantine church there. Two things were extraordinary about this find. First, it could be dated on archaeological grounds. An earthquake in 447 CE had damaged the mosaic, so the stones were older than that. Moreover, Greek had been written over the Armenian in antiquity. This meant that the Armenian was rather older than 447, and was most probably made while St. Mesrop Maštoc‘ was still alive. You can imagine the sense of awe that I felt when I realised this. The second extraordinary thing was that two of these graffiti—they are just names—were made, as I recognized from the handwriting, by individuals who also wrote their names in Wadi Haggag in the Sinai. This meant that the oldest of the Sinai inscriptions were of the same vintage, i.e., early fifth century. On this basis, I was able to isolate a dozen or so inscriptions that are the very oldest Armenian writing in the world.

As if that were not enough, in 1990 my friend David Amit, of blessed memory, uncovered the Eustathius mosaic on the corner of HaNevi'im St. and Route no. 1. I have no time here to go into this tale, which bears on the existence of an Armenian suburb in Musrara, to which the famous Bird Mosaic is another witness. This discovery has been followed by a series of others. So we have, the two sarcophagus covers from Musrara and a new mosaic on the eastern slopes of Mt. Scopus from the sixth century, the Eustathius mosaic (7th century), a pre-Abbasid inscription from Givati Parking lot outside the walls to the south, and just recently and still unpublished, another inscription dated on grounds of the script to the 9-10th century. Moreover, a seventh century graffito of four lines was found in a pilgrim hostel outside the Jaffa gate. This documentation of an ancient Armenian presence in

Jerusalem continually grows even stronger. These inscriptions, together with the study of many dedicatory inscriptions from the St. James, the oldest of which is 10th century, has fed my archeological / epigraphic persona.

I leave aside for a separate discussion the investigation of the Jewish cemetery of the 12-13th centuries from the village of Eghegis in Vayoc‘ Jor, the old Ōrbelian capital city, near Eghegnadzor in southern Armenia. This medieval burial site is one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the world, and preserves most significant Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions. Investigating it hints at another direction of my work, which is the study of the history of the Jews in Armenia and Armenian-Jewish relations, starting from the time of Tigran Medz.

Now I shall mention a further aspect of my interest in Armenian Studies. In 1971 I published the first computer-assisted work ever performed on a literary text in Armenian. The work was done on the Hebrew University's mainframe computer with punch cards. Since then and up to a few years ago, I have been much involved in digital implementation and research on Armenian texts in a number of ways. I used computers for the preparation of critical editions of Bible-related texts, of concordances, and so forth. My interest in innovation in this field has not waned, but I am no longer a pioneer, and many fine young scholars, in Armenia and abroad, have continued the work. Nowadays I am glad just to benefit from their efforts.

After political events gave access to the Armenian Monastery in 1967, I fell under the influence of the Librarian of Manuscripts, Archbishop Norayr Bogharian, and I remained close to him until his death, decades later. In those days he was producing volumes of the great catalogue, Մայր Ցուցակ ձեռագրաց Սրբոց Յակոբեանց. As each volume appeared he would present me with a copy and I read

the whole eleven volumes all the way through. This catalogue is a remarkable achievement, and much credit redounds to the Monastery of the Sts. James from its distinguished monk. The learning with which it is packed is, in my view, too little recognized in the Armenological world. Amongst other things, *Norayr srpazan* published many short texts in the Catalogue and noted the existence of many more. I started to translate and publish such texts related to biblical, particularly Old Testament traditions and continue this work to the present. Of course, my 4 Ezra work provided an initial stimulus in that direction and Archbishop Norayr's encouragement added to it. It was in this field that my two interests, Second Temple Period Judaism and Armenian Studies came together.

Some treatises of the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, survived only in Armenian. First published by the Venice Mekhitarists, they had been studied by my predecessor at the Hebrew University, Hans Lewy, who taught Jewish Hellenistic literature and had learned Armenian. He was preparing an edition of these texts, and microfilms of manuscripts of them, chiefly from Etchmiadzin, are still in his archives in the National Library. In 1936 he published the Armenian text of one treatise called *On Jonah* and the type for that publication was set by the Sts. James Press. WWII disrupted his work and an untimely illness took his life shortly after. His work was never finished. I had hopes, early on, of finding in Armenian further unknown works of Ancient Jewish literature, thus marrying my two interests.

This line of work, on Armenian texts related to biblical traditions, combined two challenges: publication of texts of the virtually unknown Armenian corpus of biblically-related texts, and the attempt to put the edition of the Armenian text of the Old Testament on a solid, textual footing. I had students well trained in textual criticism and interested in the Armenian biblical text, chiefly Peter Cowe and Claude

Cox. I myself published a number of methodological articles on the subject and even an electronic edition of Song of Songs on the web site of the Hebrew University's Armenian Studies program. In recent years, however, I have moved beyond these studies, to what is now one of my central interests. Armenian creativity is well known to us in art and in poetry; a large body of patristic work preserved in Armenian; Armenian historiography has been both admired and studied as a major aspect of Armenian culture. But the Armenian treatment of biblical narratives, both in new retellings and new understanding of biblical tales, and the integration of those traditions into other branches of Armenian culture, from poetry to theology, from commentary to iconography, has never been studied. I decided some years ago to devote most of my efforts to the publication of the Armenian apocrypha, only distracted, for the most part, by new inscriptions.

Beyond all these fields of interest, which grew from learning Armenian, is not just scholarly curiosity, but a basic sympathy towards the culture and life of the Armenian people. The vitality of Armenian creativity and spiritual values exercise an irresistible attraction for me and I have had a richer life because of my association with them. I pray that my own work will play a role in increasing knowledge and understanding of this outstanding heritage.