

The Cassuto Translations of Rabbi Abrahams

At the end of November, 1961, Chief Rabbi Prof. Israel Abrahams left Cape Town for Israel, where he was to continue his work of translating the Cassuto Bible Commentaries. These Commentaries had been written by Prof. Umberto Cassuto in Hebrew. Prof. Cassuto, who was for many years until his death in 1951, Magnes Professor of the Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, was one of the foremost Biblical scholars in the world.

A few years ago, the Hebrew University chose Prof. Abrahams from among several candidates to translate these unique works into English for the first time. By the end of 1961, the first two volumes were in the press, a third was in the hands of the printer, and Prof. Abrahams' visit to Israel was in order to complete his work on the fourth (and last?) of the volumes of the translation.

The original Commentaries, as well as the translations and their publication were made possible through the generous support of the Perry Foundation for Biblical Research at the Hebrew University. This Foundation had been set up by Mr. Silas S. Perry, of Johannesburg, a man deeply interested in Jewish scholarship.

The volumes were published by the Magnes Press of the Hebrew University. The first two volumes were entitled "A commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I. From Adam to Noah", and "The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch". The volume at present in the press is on Genesis "From Noah to Abraham". The fourth (and largest) volume, on which Prof. Abrahams was working in Jerusalem, is entitled "Exodus".

In "The Documentary Hypothesis", Cassuto, in a series of 8 lectures to teachers, subjected the documentary hypothesis to heavy criticism. In "From Adam to Noah", he applied his methods in a detailed commentary on the early chapters of Genesis. On February 7, 1962, a ceremony was held at the Hebrew University to launch the first two volumes of the translation. The ceremony, to which the entire Arts Faculty of the Hebrew University was invited, was in Hebrew. At the ceremony, referred to as "a significant event in the field of Jewish scholarship", Prof. Abrahams mentioned that this was the first time that a modern Hebrew work on the Bible had been translated into English in South Africa, and also that this was the first time that the Hebrew University had invited anyone in South Africa to undertake a literary work of this nature. Professor H.L. Ginsberg, of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and Visiting Professor of the Bible at the Hebrew University, was full of praise for the translation, which he regarded as "not only accurate and extremely well written, but also faithful to the spirit of the original". He stressed the importance of translations like these in enabling scholars throughout the world to become acquainted with the studies and creative thinking of Israel's scholars. There were also several other speakers, who all praised the excellent translations. Mr. Perry was incidentally prevented by ill-health from attending the ceremony.

A reviewer had this to say about the volumes launched at this ceremony: "These two handsome books will go a long way towards acquainting the English reader with the fine insights of a distinguished Bible scholar of our day". He also says that Prof. Abrahams did his work of translation very well.

On his way back to Cape Town from Israel at the end of February, Prof. Abrahams was the guest of Mr. & Mrs. Perry in Johannesburg. Late in March, it was a welcome home for Prof. Abrahams in Cape Town, many tributes were paid to him and his work. Some of these were; That he had achieved a tremendously difficult task in translating ancient Biblical Hebrew into Modern English, and in finding the original meaning of certain words open to new interpretations (Mr. M. Ticktin, President of the Great Synagogue, Cape Town); That he was a brilliant scholar of the highest standing, and that the Hebrew University had made a wise choice in selecting him for the task (Mr. S. Pratt, Minister for Israel); That he deserved the thanks of all denominations for giving the fruits of his knowledge to the world (The Mayor of Cape Town.)

Rabbi Abrahams at the same function stated that the work had proved far more difficult than he had expected. It was a trial of the spirit and the mind to attempt to render into another language the thoughts of a man who is no more. He had been taken aback at being chosen from several candidates for the task.

References :

Southern African Jewish Times: 17/11/1961, p.5; 2/2/1962, p.6; 23/2/1962, p.2; 9/3/1962, p.2; 30/3/1962, p. 19.
Zionist Record: 2/2/1962, p.8; 23/2/1962, p. 15(review)

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Donated to the University of Cape Town Libraries by Prof. I. Abrahams,
Department of Hebrew, University of Cape Town.

The MSS of ^{his} translations of the Genesis commentaries of Prof. Umberto
Cassuto, consisting of :

- a. The documentary hypothesis (holograph copy)
- b. The documentary hypothesis and the Pentateuch (typed)
- c. The book of Genesis (from Adam to Noah) (typed)
- d. The book of Genesis (from Noah to Abraham) (~~typed~~) *holograph.*

Total : 4 parcels

e. Included under this \$ number is
Professor I. Abrahams' CASSUTO (translation)
Commentaries on Book of Exodus