



**PURSUING
THE
QUEST**

Selected Writings of
LOUIS JACOBS

Edited and with an introduction by
Harry Freedman PhD
Editor, www.louisjacobs.org

**PURSUING THE QUEST
SELECTED WRITINGS
OF LOUIS JACOBS**



Includes Full Bibliography

Edited and with an introduction

by Harry Freedman PhD

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SOURCES REPRINTED IN THIS BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

Louis Jacobs is the most important religious thinker to have emerged from the British Jewish community. Born on 17th July 1920, he was educated in Manchester Yeshiva and Gateshead Kollel where he was regarded as an ilui; an outstanding genius of the rabbinic world. His decision to enrol as a student at London University provided him with an additional perspective and it was the combination of intellectual brilliance, Talmudic logic and scientific methodology which was to inform and define his lifelong scholarship.

He married Shulamit Lisagorska in 1944, had his first son, Ivor, a year later and following month took up his first rabbinic position as the assistant to Rabbi Eli Munk at Golders Green Beth HaMidrash; a largely German congregation generally known as 'Munk's'. Two years' later he took up his own pulpit, at the Central Synagogue in his home town of Manchester, where his task was to preach in English, except for the Shabbats before Pesach and Yom Kippur when he was to deliver a sermon in Yiddish. He also delivered a nightly Talmud shiur in Yiddish to the older members of the congregation.

The turning point in his career came early in 1954 when Louis and Shula, now with three children (Naomi had been born in 1947 and David in 1952) accepted the post of rabbi at the New West End Synagogue. The New West End was on the progressive wing of the United Synagogue, adhering to an Anglo-Jewish tradition which included a mixed choir and no public prayers for the restoration of sacrifices. His appointment caused some consternation amongst his former teachers and traditional colleagues; Rabbi Eli Munk writing that he was 'very stunned' and that others were 'flabbergasted' by his decision to take the job. But it was at the New West End that Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs was able to fully draw together the twin strands of his rabbinic and secular scholarship and to embark on an

intellectual career which was characterised by popular and scholarly acclaim and no small amount of communal controversy.

In 1959 Louis Jacobs resigned his post at the New West End to take up an academic position at Jews' College, the pre-eminent rabbinic training establishment in London. It was assumed that he would eventually succeed the principal of the College upon his retirement but when the post fell vacant his application was rejected, because of views he had expressed in his book *We Have Reason to Believe*. The book had not caused much of a stir when it was published in 1957. It argued, amongst other things, that the findings of biblical criticism meant that the traditional view that Moses had received the Torah on Mount Sinai, could no longer be upheld. This did not mean, as Louis Jacobs, argued consistently throughout his career, that he denied the doctrine of *Torah min Hashamayim*; Torah from Heaven. It meant that the process of divine revelation had to be re-evaluated, not the fact of it.

With his post at Jews' College terminated, Louis Jacobs applied to return to his old pulpit at the New West End. The synagogue approved his application but the Chief Rabbi blocked it. It was at this point that the row, which had been simmering since the Jews' College disappointment, erupted in full. The bulk of the New West End membership resigned and in 1964 a new, breakaway congregation, the New London Synagogue, was formed.

The 'Jacobs' Affair', as it came to be known, was the most divisive event in the history of British Jewry. But although it frustrated Louis Jacobs' desire for a British orthodoxy confident in what he saw as a moderate, intellectually-driven, traditionalism it by no means inhibited his scholarly output.

Louis Jacobs regarded his intellectual endeavours as indicative of a 'quest-driven faith'. As his biographer, Rabbi Dr. Elliot Cosgrove writes, 'it is the notion of a "quest," ... that would formally and informally inform his writing throughout

his life'.¹ It is because his writings formed part of his quest that he studied and wrote on such a wide range of topics; no one subject was adequate to contain his thirst for knowledge. And although Louis Jacobs is known as one of the foremost scholars of his age, his interests were not confined to Jewish thought. He was as comfortable quoting Chesterton, Shakespeare or even the latest movie as he was citing Talmud or any of the thousands of works that comprise the body of rabbinic literature. He wrote over thirty books, and hundreds of articles and reviews.

This book is intended to present a representative sample of Louis Jacobs's writings. They are not always his best known pieces; instead we have tried to portray the breadth of his writings and the manner of his thought. We have only been able to reproduce a tiny fraction of his output, but we hope that it will stimulate you to read further. A full archive of his writings, together with many videos, is available at www.louisjacobs.org and a full bibliography of his works is appended to this volume.

A note on transliteration and spelling

Louis Jacobs's works were produced by many different publishers and in many publications. Each had their own house style for transliteration. Some articles were published with American readers in mind. Wherever possible we have retained the style and spelling of the original publication, hence many Hebrew, Aramaic or even English words will appear differently throughout this book, depending on the publication the article was taken from.

¹ Elliot J. Cosgrove; "Teyku: The Insoluble Contradictions in the Life and Thought of Louis Jacobs", PhD Thesis, University of Chicago 2008

THEOLOGY

SYNTHESIS OF TRADITIONAL AND CRITICAL VIEWS

WE HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE, (1957) PP. 76-81

This passage is taken from We Have Reason to Believe, the first book in which Rabbi Jacobs discusses Jewish theology. The jacket to the third, revised edition states that the book 'provides an approach which can contribute to the working out of a synthesis between the old knowledge and the new learning.'

The passage comes from Chapter 9, SYNTHESIS OF TRADITIONAL AND CRITICAL VIEWS. Earlier in the chapter Rabbi Jacobs had discussed two ways of regarding the challenge of Biblical Criticism and its implications for Jewish observance. One way accepts Biblical Criticism 'more or less in toto to the detriment not alone of the doctrine of 'Torah from Heaven' but also to the practical observances of Judaism. Another school feels obliged to reject entirely, and to combat positively in the name of Orthodoxy, any untraditional views. And there is the third view according to which a synthesis between the traditional and critical theories is possible....'

The third way is not 'between' modernism and fundamentalism but beyond and distinct from both, so that those who tread this way may take Scripture with the utmost seriousness as the record of revelation while avoiding the pitfalls of fundamentalism. As Herberg puts it: 'In this view, a shift in the very meaning of the term "revelation" is involved. Revelation is not the communication of infallible information, as the fundamentalists claim, nor is it the outpouring of "inspired" sages and poets, as the modernists conceive it.

Revelation is the *self-disclosure of God in his dealings with the world*. Scripture is thus not itself revelation but a humanly mediated record of revelation. It is a story composed of many strands and fragments, each arising in its own time, place and circumstances, yet it is essentially one, for it is throughout the story of the encounter of God and man in the history of Israel. Scripture as revelation is not a compendium of recondite information or metaphysical propositions; it is quite literally *Heilsgeschichte*, redemptive history'.

It goes without saying that these or similar views which see no incompatibility between the idea of Scripture as the Word of God and the use of critical *methods* in its investigation, can only be entertained if the doctrine of 'verbal' inspiration is rejected. It is true that in the vast range of Jewish teaching on revelation there are numerous passages in which 'verbal' inspiration is accepted or, at least, hinted at. But this is not the whole story. It can be demonstrated that long before the rise of modern criticism some of the Jewish teachers had a conception of revelation which leaves room for the idea of human co-operation with the divine. It will be helpful if a few of the passages containing these ideas are quoted.

(1) The Talmud¹ tells of an oven, the ritual purity of which is debated by R. Eliezer (2nd Cent, C.E.) and the sages. R. Eliezer said to the Sages: If the ruling is as I hold let this carob-tree prove it. Thereupon the carob-tree was torn out of its place but the Sages retorted: No proof can be brought from a carob-tree. R. Eliezer then said: If the ruling accords with me, let the stream of water prove it. Whereupon the stream flowed backwards but the Sages said: No proof can be brought from a stream of water. Again R. Eliezer urged: Let the walls of the House of Learning prove it. Whereupon the walls of the House of Learning began to totter but the Sages remained unconvinced. Finally, R. Eliezer said: If I am right let it be proved from Heaven, and a Heavenly voice cried out: Why do

¹ B.M. 59b.

you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the law is in accord with his ruling? But R. Joshua said: 'It is not in Heaven'²—the Torah states 'After the majority must one incline'³ and this means that the law must be decided by a majority of human judges and no appeal to a heavenly voice is valid. The story concludes that when R. Nathan met Elijah, the Prophet, he asked him: What did the Holy One blessed be He do in that hour? And the answer was that He laughed with joy, saying, 'My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me'!

(2) They were disputing in the Heavenly Academy: If the bright spot preceded the white hair,⁴ he is unclean; if the reverse he is clean. If in doubt—the Holy One, blessed be He, ruled, clean, the entire Heavenly Academy ruled, He is unclean. They asked: Who shall decide it? Rabbah bar Nahmani, for he is a great authority on these matters. Rabbah died and as he died he exclaimed, 'Clean, clean!'⁵

(3) R. Isaac said: The same watchword (communication) is revealed to many prophets, yet no two prophets prophecy in the identical phraseology, if they are true prophets.⁶ An anticipation of the recognition by modern scholars that the prophetic inspiration is mediated through the personality of the prophet; Amos speaking in the language of a herdsman, Isaiah in the language of a prince.

(4) Isaiah and Ezekiel both saw the King, say the Rabbis,⁷ but Isaiah as a city-dweller, familiar with the sight of the king and his court, hence his description is brief, Ezekiel as a rustic who is filled with wonder at the unfamiliar sight, hence his description is lengthy.

² Deut. xxx. 12.

³ Ex. xxiii. 2.

⁴ See Lev. xiii. 1-3.

⁵ B.M. 86a.

⁶ Sanh. 89a.

⁷ Hag. 13b.

(5) Rab Judah said in the name of Rab, when Moses ascended on high he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in fixing crowns to the letters of the Torah. Moses asked after the meaning of these crowns and God told him that there will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws. 'Lord of the Universe', said Moses, 'permit me to see him'. God replied: 'Turn thee round'. Moses went and sat behind eight rows of Akiba's disciples. Not being able to follow their discussions he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master: 'Whence do you know it?' and the latter replied: 'It is a law given to Moses on Sinai,' he was comforted. Thereupon he returned to the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: 'Lord of the Universe, Thou hast such a man and Thou givest the Torah by me!'⁸ He replied, 'Be silent, for so it has come to My mind'. In other words the Torah that Akiba was teaching was so different from the Torah given to Moses – because the social, economic, political and religious conditions were so different in Akiba's day – that, at first, Moses could not recognise his Torah in the Torah taught by Akiba. But he was reassured when he realised that Akiba's Torah was *implicit* in his Torah, was, indeed, an attempt to make his Torah relevant to the spiritual needs of Jews in the age of Akiba.

(6) R. Ishmael b. Elisha (1st-2nd Cent, C.E.) disagreed with those of his contemporaries who derived rules and teachings from a pleonastic word or syllable, e.g. the use of the infinite absolute form of the verb. For instance, the verse concerning idolators in which it is said that they 'will *surely* be cut off' – *hikkareth tikkareth*⁹ – is interpreted by Akiba to convey the thought that they will be cut off in both this world and the next. To this Ishmael replied that no teachings can be

⁸ Men. 29b.

⁹ Num. xv. 31.

derived from such expressions for this is how Hebrew was spoken and 'the Torah speaks in the language of men'¹⁰

It is well known that Maimonides used this principle to explain the Biblical anthropomorphisms.¹¹

(7) When a Rabbinic precept is carried out, e.g. the kindling of the Hannukah lights, the blessing to be recited runs: 'Who hast sanctified us with His commandments and *hast commanded* us to . . .'¹² In other words, not only did the Rabbis recognise a human element in the Bible, they perceived the divine in post-Biblical developments of Judaism.

(8) Azariah Figo (1579-1647) gives this interpretation to the rabbinic distinction between Moses and other prophets, that he saw God through a polished glass while they saw Him through a dim glass. Moses saw God Himself, as if through a window pane; the other prophets saw only His image as reflected in a mirror, i.e. through their own personalities,¹³ as we would say. Figo's view goes further than the Rabbinic views mentioned above (3 and 4). The Rabbis speak of the prophets seeing God and *expressing* what they had seen through their personalities; Figo speaks of the prophets *seeing* God through their own personalities!

(9) Isaac of Vorka (a famous Hasidic Rabbi) said: It is told in the Midrash: The Ministering angels once said to God: 'You have permitted Moses to write whatever he wants to, so there is nothing to prevent him from saying to Israel: I have given you the Torah'. God replied: This he would not do, but if he did he would still be keeping faith with me'. The Rabbi interpreted this with a parable. A merchant wanted to go on a journey. He took

¹⁰ Sifre Num. 15. 31; Yer. Yeb. viii, 8d; Yer. Ned. i. 36c; B.M. 31b and freq. see J.E. Vol. VI, p. 649.

¹¹ Guide, Part I, Chapter xxvi. Cf. Bahya: 'Duties of the Heart,' Sha'ar Ha-Yihud, Chapter 10.

¹² See Sabb. 23a.

¹³ Binnah Le-'Ittim, P. II, Ser. 44, quoted by Israel Bettan, Studies in Jewish Preaching, Cincinnati, 1939, p. 255-256.

an assistant and let him work in his shop. He himself spent most of his time in the adjoining room from where he could hear what was going on next door. During the first few weeks he sometimes heard his assistant tell a customer 'The master cannot let this go for so low a price'. The merchant did not go on his journey. During the next few weeks he occasionally heard the voice next door say: 'We cannot let it go for so low a price'. He still postponed his journey. But in the next few weeks he heard the assistant say: 'I cannot let it go for so low a price'. It was then that he started on his journey.¹⁴

(10) The rival schools of Hillel and Shammai debated, we are told, for a number of years, whose ruling should be accepted. Eventually a Heavenly voice proclaimed: 'The words of both are the words of the living God, but the rule is in accordance with the school of Hillel'¹⁵—another example of Rabbinic recognition of the divine in post-Biblical developments.

Allowing for the legendary nature of some of the above passages, it must be obvious that many Jewish teachers conceived of revelation in more dynamic terms than the doctrine of 'verbal' inspiration would imply. For them, revelation is an encounter between the divine and the human, so that there is a human as well as a divine factor in revelation, God revealing His Will not alone to men but *through* men. No doubt our new attitude to the Biblical record, in which, as the result of historical, literary and archaeological investigations, the Bible is seen against the background of the times in which its various books were written, ascribes more to the human element than the ancients would have done, but this is a difference in degree, not in kind. The new knowledge need not in any way affect our reverence for the Bible and our loyalty to its teachings. God's Power is not lessened because He preferred to co-operate with His creatures in producing the Book of

¹⁴ Buber: *Tales of the Hasidim, The Later Masters*, N.Y., 1948, p. 295-6.

¹⁵ Erub. 13b.

Books. Applying his words to our problem, we can fittingly quote the penetrating observation of the ancient Talmudic sage, that in every passage in the Bible where the greatness of God is mentioned, there you find also His humility.¹⁶

This chapter might suitably be concluded with the splendid illustration of the point of view we have been trying to sketch, given by Emil Brunner. Brunner asks us to think of a gramophone record. The voice we hear on the record is the voice we want to hear, it is the actual voice of the artist who delights us, but we hear it through the inevitable distortions of the record. We hear the authentic voice of God speaking to us through the pages of the Bible—we know that it is the voice of God because of the uniqueness of its message and the response it awakens in our higher nature—and its truth is in no way affected in that we can only hear that voice through the medium of human beings who, hearing it for the first time, endeavoured to record it for us.

¹⁶ *Meg. 31a.*