

Semitic, Biblical, and Jewish Studies

in Honor of Richard C. Steiner

edited by

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Richard Steiner: An Appreciation

Richard Steiner, “Richie,” as he is known affectionately to his colleagues and, for the last four decades, to his students, is the “scholar’s scholar.” As some of those fortunate students, we are grateful for the opportunity to honor Richie with this volume. His life has been dedicated entirely to his research and teaching, with remarkable results, and nothing could be more fitting than scholarship dedicated to his honor.

As early as college, Richie threw himself into the study of Bible and Semitics, first in Yeshiva University, and then during a year in Jerusalem, where he learned from Joseph Naveh, Yechezkel Kutscher, and Nechama Leibowitz, among others. He spent a year after college in Uppsala, where he studied Greek and Akkadian (in Swedish), and finally arrived at the doctoral program in the University of Pennsylvania. Penn boasted not only Moshe Greenberg in Bible, rabbinics, and Hebrew, but also the founder of sociolinguistics, William Labov, and the great Indo-Europeanist Henry Hoenigswald, who served as Richie’s dissertation advisor. Together with Labov and Malcah Yaeger, Richie wrote a quantitative study of vowel shifts in contemporary English (B1).¹ The broad and deep training in linguistics that Richie received there was the foundation for the unique brand of scholarship that he developed in the following decades. Richie’s fellow graduate students at Penn became his lifelong friends and formative influences, and it is notable that several of them are among the contributors to this volume.

Richie’s doctoral thesis, “The Case for Fricative-Laterals in Proto-Semitic” (B2) quickly established him as a leading Semitist, and particularly

1 In-line citations refer to the list of publications immediately following this preface. B1 = Book #1; A1 = Article 1; R1 = Review 1; etc.

as one of the foremost scholars of Semitic phonology. After the publication of that work as a monograph, another book on phonology followed: *Affricated Šade in the Semitic Languages* (B3).

A sabbatical spent in the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute a few years later proved to be influential in many ways. Friendships with scholars such as the late lamented archaeologist Larry Stager and the assyriologist Erica Reiner were forged, and these accompanied Richie in the following decades. Intellectually, one event that year shaped much of Richie's later work. Because of Richie's work on phonetics and phonology, Professor Joshua Blau recommended that he take a look at a strange text, an Aramaic text in Demotic script, that had been only very partially published in the 1940s by a scholar at the University of Chicago; although the text was in New York, photographs were in the Oriental Institute. Blau thought Richie would be interested because the little that had been published suggested that the Aramaic letter *tsade* was represented by the combination of the Demotic signs for <t> and <s>.

As it turned out, the investigation into this text took over Richie's life for an extended period of time. Working with Egyptologist Charles Nims, he published major sections of the text, finally publishing an online edition of the entire p. Amherst 63 in 2016 (A71), although the work was essentially completed in the 1990s. Besides his linguistic skills and insight, Richie was helped here by his unmatched devotion to his work. He reported later that his first decipherment came by working around the clock for more than two days, so thrilled by the possibilities that sleep simply seemed unnecessary. The text turned out to contain a passage that is parallel to Psalm 20, providing a clear example of an extra-biblical text that is genetically related to the biblical psalm, as well as allowing for reconstructions of the movements of the community behind the text (A4, 5, 6).

Later a sabbatical was spent with a large microscope in the Morgan Library, poring over every jot and tittle of ink over the course of an entire year, so that each sign was studied and re-studied, until Richie felt that he knew the scribe's hand intimately. His work on that text led to another Egyptological project, this time at the suggestion of Robert Ritner of the Oriental Institute. What began with an innocent question – “could 333 represent something in Semitic?” – led to a number of years of research,

culminating in the publication of what Richie argued were the earliest continuous West Semitic texts, serpent spells transliterated into Egyptian hieroglyphs and found in the Pyramid Texts. This publication (B6), and his public lecture on the subject in Jerusalem (A55), garnered worldwide media attention—which, Richie would no doubt hasten to add, is more trouble than it is worth!

Another serendipitous door opened in the 1990s, which also illustrates just how broad Richie’s interests are. In Jerusalem, Richie accompanied a young scholar to the home of Prof. Israel M. Ta-Shma to do some work on a new text from the Cairo Geniza. The intended purpose of that visit bore its intended fruit, but along the way, Richie discovered a whole new field: Byzantine Jewish biblical interpretation (A22, R4). This led to many studies on that text, a biblical commentary written by a man identified by Richie as “Reuel,” in which a hitherto lost chapter in medieval Jewish intellectual history was recovered (see further below).

Throughout the vicissitudes of Richie’s life as an intellectual omnivore, everything has always started with language. In his hands it is astonishing where linguistics lead. As already mentioned, Richie’s first publications were in the fields of historical and descriptive linguistics. Other studies of morphology and syntax, both in Semitics generally and especially in Northwest Semitic, followed (A1, 2, 3, 53, 64, 65), and Richie has often contributed to the interpretation of Semitic inscriptions from the Proto-Sinaitic texts through Syriac mosaic texts (A9, A39, 45, 69, 70). Whether in linguistics or philology, his work always stands out for its rigor and quality, testaments to his thorough linguistic training in addition to his methodical mind.

The linguistic training whose importance he so often emphasized to his students is particularly evident in his studies of semantics (A37) and syntax (A27) of ancient Hebrew, and in his masterful synthetic presentations of that language (A13, 31). These abilities were critical to Richie’s work on Semitic texts in Egyptian scripts (A16, 30, 38, 41, 42). While others had worked on the mysterious Aramaic text in Demotic script, the challenge posed by its decipherment was so difficult that only an Aramaist of Richie’s caliber could have succeeded at the task, thereby opening the text to others (also A10, 19, 29).

In Richie's hands, linguistics and philology can even lead to medieval social history (A62) and the recovery of lost rabbinic texts (A73). More often, however, language led Richie back to his other love: the Hebrew Bible. Here Richie has made many important contributions, publishing ten articles thus far in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, the flagship journal in the field (28, 35, 37, 43, 46, 48, 51, 59, 61, 66). His work has ranged from the earliest parts of biblical literature through the Persian Period, as well as Second Temple literature. Among these articles are several which defend Masoretic readings of poetic texts widely held to be corrupted; by bringing evidence from comparative Northwest Semitic studies Richie can often demonstrate that the supposedly dubious reading is actually a perfectly acceptable form, sometimes poetic, sometimes archaic, sometimes dialectal (A28, 52, 57).

One oft-cited article (A46) combines phonological history with textual work in order to date the Greek translations of some biblical books. Along the way, this magisterial study showed that there was long a distinction between spoken Hebrew and the reading tradition of the Bible, and that much phonological information was preserved by "readers" that was not marked in the written text (also A24). In other cases, his work, based on careful readings of primary texts in every conceivable language as well as archaeological reports and other relevant data, shows that scholars have overlooked possibilities of historical reconstruction or comparative study. His studies of Egyptian practices and their relevance for Leviticus (A68), and his painstaking reconstruction of archival practices that illuminate aspects of the book of Ezra (A43, 48, 51) are noteworthy examples.

A frequent subtext of Richie's work is that previous scholars did not interpret a biblical form or a passage correctly because they did not understand the language well enough; a variation on this theme is that earlier scholars made mistakes because they cited the latest version of an argument in agreeing or disagreeing with it, although the earliest version of the argument is often the most learned and nuanced (A35, 61, 66). His treatments of biblical cruxes are accompanied by meticulous, exhaustive surveys of the history of interpretation of the passage, ranging from modern scholarship all the way back to classical, and in some cases, inner-biblical exegesis, and drawing attention to many cases in which modern scholarly

suggestions were anticipated by the ancients and the classical commentaries. Richie's *Forschungsgeschichten* in the introductions to his studies stand as scholarly achievements in their own right. The recent on-line publication of his work on the *modern* history of the Aramaic text in Demotic script (A72) is the fruit of intensive archival work.

Syntactic ambiguities and their implications for biblical interpretation are the subjects of several innovative articles which combine philological, semantic and syntactic analysis to illuminate the multiple possible meanings of a biblical text. Had the Amherst Papyrus, Reuel, and other projects not intervened, it is likely that we would have more publications from Richie on this area of research, and he had an NEH grant to fund that work. Fortunately, the course that Richie taught on the topic for many years has produced a rich trove of "oral Torah" transmitted to students and scholars around the world. Richie's interest in the relationship between syntax and exegesis led to publications on post-biblical Hebrew and Aramaic as well, exploring the history of interpretation and textual development of passages in the Haggadah and the Kol Nidre text recited on the eve of Yom Kippur (A32, 56, 67).

Richie has made substantial contributions to the field of medieval Jewish Bible interpretation as well. A relatively early article of his (A15) developed a new way of defining the ever-elusive dichotomy between *peshat* and *derash*. He continued to address this issue in a study (A33) establishing a foundational distinction of approaches within the variegated *peshat* tradition. As Richie has shown in such a compelling manner, it is an oversimplification to speak of one single conception of *peshat* within the medieval tradition. Rather, a rainbow-like spectrum of philological-literary methodologies is represented within the medieval *peshat* tradition as it emerged in different centers of Jewish learning.

Richie's studies exhibits expertise in the most important traditions of medieval Jewish Bible exegesis: Rabbanite and Karaite interpretation in the Muslim east, the Andalusian tradition that would be epitomized by Ibn Ezra, the northern French *peshat* tradition pioneered by Rashi and his circle of students, and the synthesis represented by Nahmanides (A54, 63). By the mid-1990s the exciting discovery—noted above—of an early Rabbanite Byzantine interpretive tradition revealed an entirely

unknown branch of Jewish Bible exegesis, to which Richie devoted his energies, producing some of the most definitive, authoritative studies in this new subfield (A73). His studies laid the groundwork for identifying the various writings associated with this school, exploring their linguistic characteristics, as well as the exegetical methodologies they employ.

Perhaps most often quoted in subsequent scholarship is his groundbreaking study on Jewish Byzantine theories of biblical redaction (A44). Here, Richie addresses a topic that has captured the imagination of scholars of Jewish Bible interpretation — the notion of the narrator–editor of the biblical text, which has its roots in the Karaite tradition, especially in the commentaries of Yefet Ben Eli. As recent studies have shown, Yefet displays a remarkable awareness of the workings of the biblical narrator, as well as the role of later biblical editors in fashioning the prophetic literature. Richie explores how this concept is manifested within the Byzantine tradition and beyond.

For Richie, no avenue of investigation is too far afield and no detail too abstruse to be tracked down in solving a puzzle, an approach that led him to study, among other topics, animal husbandry and horticulture, brought to bear in an investigation of Amos' occupations (B4, A49), and magical incantations, witchcraft, and funerary practices, adduced in an exploration of the biblical conception of the soul (B7).

As a teacher, Richie was known for his unique course offerings, including Philological Exegesis, which covered, over an entire semester, selected verses from Jeremiah 1–2, and the year-long course on Hebrew Syntax and Biblical Exegesis. The material and methodology of the courses were fascinating, elevating the enterprise of biblical interpretation to a level of logical rigor and intellectual challenge that his students had not encountered previously, or, most likely, since. In class Richie's genuine joy and enthusiasm was evident whenever a student offered an original solution or presented a convincing argument, even (or perhaps especially) when it contradicted his own point of view. Richie would often cite students who had graduated decades ago; he had meticulously recorded insightful comments made by students, and these students — some long gone on to professions other than academia — continued to contribute to the class discourse in this way.

This brief appreciation certainly does not cover all the areas of scholarship

to which Richie has contributed, as a glance at the list of publications on the coming pages indicates. And it does not even begin to articulate the quiet personal warmth exuded by Richie and the profound friendships he has forged with colleagues and students around the world. The poem by David Berger below will have to provide some indication, and the alacrity with which his friends and colleagues jumped at the opportunity to write for his Festschrift will serve as everlasting testimony.

Following his retirement from teaching in 2014, scholarship continues to flow from his erudite pen, despite health challenges. We wish Richie, together with his wife Sara, who has always given him unflagging encouragement and support, many years of good health and continued productivity, and we look forward to many more years of learning from his work—always meticulous, always challenging, always illuminating, and always a model of what his students strive to emulate.

* * *

When the Sabbath came to end on the auspicious occasion of Prof. Steiner's forty-second birthday, my wife Pearl and I received a call informing us that in about an hour there would be a small get-together in the Steiner house to mark the occasion. Pearl insisted that I compose a tribute to mark the event. The product of the resulting labors follows. The comments in the footnotes below were added in 2018.

As the Forty-Second Beckoned
David Berger, Yeshiva University

Forty-two years of fricatives
And plosives and liquids and glottals
Who would have thunk it
When he was a tyke
Sibilantly sucking his bottles?

Though wholly free of original *sin*²
Not proto-Shame-itic at all,³

² A friend of Prof. Steiner had suggested that he add a subtitle to his book, *The Case for Fricative-Laterals in Proto-Semitic*, to wit, *A Study of Original Sin*. Prof. Steiner complied with this suggestion, but an editor with a sadly deficient sense of humor deleted the subtitle, which would have no doubt increased sales exponentially.

³ In the first instance, freedom from original sin refers to freedom from the taint of the transgression of Adam and Eve. Such a person would not bear any shame from that primeval event and would consequently be characterized as “not proto-shame-itic.” In the second instance, freedom from original sin means that one was born without knowledge of the original, Protosemitic pronunciation of the letter *sin*. At this stage, such a person would not be Protosemitic at all. Since the proper pronunciation of the name of Noah’s relevant son is

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A gaggle of giggles would burst from his throat
When *shwa mobile* rushed through the hall.⁴

Clad and bound by *Begad Kefat*,⁵
Luminary of *Lamnar*,
Liberator of the holy sparks
From inscriptions brought from afar.⁶

No longer does the number forty-two
Evoke Times Square and Jackie and Radin,⁷
But the vineyards of Semitic soil
By Richie triumphantly trodden!

Shame, not Sem, the proper characterization of that person would be “not proto-Shame-itic.” Given this infant’s lack of linguistic expertise, it would be surprising to find him reacting to a grammatical phenomenon. This point accounts for the initial “though” in the second stanza.

⁴ Note too that a certain type of toy suspended over an infant’s crib was (still is?) called a mobile.

⁵ That is how this mnemonic was pronounced in the Yeshivah of Flatbush in my day. Taken as words, *begad kefat* mean (more or less) clad and bound.

⁶ Prof. Steiner’s discovery that a previously undeciphered ancient inscription was a paganized version of Psalm 20 accounts, of course, for his designation as liberator of the holy sparks in such inscriptions.

⁷ 42nd Street is a major thoroughfare in New York City’s Times Square. Jackie Robinson’s number was 42. Radin alludes to the abbreviation of *Mishnah Berurah* (M.B.), the commentary on *Orah Hayyim* composed by the sage who resided in Radin. That abbreviation also serves as a standard way of writing the number 42 in Hebrew.

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מחקרים בשפות שמיות, מקרא ומדעי היהדות מוגשים לראובן שמחה שטיינר

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ע"ש מיכאל שרף



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