

BOOK REVIEWS

Maurice Olender. *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992. 193 pp.

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According to Jewish tradition, the characters in the Garden of Eden story all spoke Hebrew. Early in the history of Christianity, some church fathers demurred, but "serious scholarly work" on the subject did not begin until the Renaissance. The most famous hypothesis is that of the Swedish scholar Andreas Kempe, who in the 17th Century "demonstrated" that the serpent-spoke French (could Eve have been seduced in any other language?), that Adam spoke Danish, and that God spoke Swedish.

If Kempe was a bit myopic, for his linguistic horizons stretched only several hundred miles from his native land, things would change in the 18th Century. William Jones, a famed British jurist serving in the Supreme Court in India, undertook the study of Sanskrit and classical Hindu texts, and immediately reached the important conclusion that Sanskrit was related to Greek and Latin and thus to most of the other languages of Europe. (In actuality, Sanskrit was known to Western scholars a century before Jones, and its relationship to the languages of Europe may have been sensed by some of them, but not until Jones was the obvious stated in clear terms.) Thus was born the discipline of Indo-European studies, as it came to be called.

Maurice Olender, Maître de Conférences at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences, Paris, in his book *The Languages of Paradise*, examines the subsequent flowering of this new field of comparative philology, concentrating on selected individuals who paved the way. In case after case we read how the work of these savants influenced—and was in turn affected by—the cultural attitudes of 19th-century European society. Most importantly, Olender demonstrates how men who held the highest academic positions in Europe created scholarly myths about Aryans and Semites, leading to,

as we now know with all too clear hindsight, the nadir of European civilization in the 20th century.

At its outset, Indo-European studies did not evolve into a field devoted to the minutiae of linguistics; the idea of reconstructing phonemes and the like was still a thing of the future. Instead, "the discovery of Indo-European caused a furor that extended well beyond the discipline of comparative philology. All the human sciences, from history to mythology, and soon to include 'racial science,' were affected by the discovery of a tongue that was known not only as Indo-European but also as Aryan" (p. 7). In looking for origins, European scholars could now look beyond the languages of their homelands and neighboring countries. They could now extend their horizons and see all the way to the end of the earth, to India.

At the same time, the academicians of Europe no longer had to rely on the Bible for origins. The Renaissance and the Reformation had broken the hegemony of the Church, humanism and the age of Enlightenment had further weakened Christianity's influence over educated people, and the new age of Romanticism now was ready to explore history and cultural origins without the yoke of ecclesiastical domination. The Bible was out, due to both anti-Christian sentiments and an upsurge of anti-Semitism; the Vedas were in, as Europe fell in love with India. Paradise was moved by shifting the Garden of Eden to India, and the "river of Paradise" (see Genesis 2:10) became the Ganges. Even the relatively philo-Semitic German philologist, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), held to this view; all the more so the anti-Semitic Voltaire, who wrote (in 1775): "It seemed obvious to me that our holy Christian religion was based solely on the ancient religion of Brahma" (quoted on p. 171, n. 40).

No statement sums up this state of affairs better than the words of James Darmesteter (1849-1894): "European scientific orthodoxy believed that through the Vedas it was in contact with the first appearance of religious thought in the Indo-European race. The Vedas became the sacred book of the religious origins of the race, the Aryan Bible" (quoted on p. 9).

From this beginning, it was only a matter of time until future generations of 19th Century European scholars established the dichotomy of Aryan and Semite. Two mythical figures were invented (the sub-title of the French original is *un couple providentiel*), the Hebrew who represented the worst of the Semitic world, and the Aryan who was the paradigm for all that was best of the Indo-European world. The Hebrew could not be denied the development of monotheism, but this "true religion" was seen as the sole accomplishment of a people who otherwise were incapable of science, art, and philosophy. Moreover, the very concept of monotheism was described in negative terms. For monotheism is static and stagnant, there is no movement. By contrast, Aryan polytheism is dynamic and imaginative.

The physical world of the Semites and the Indo-Europeans was seen to parallel this polarity. The Semites were defined as a static people, restricted to a proscribed corner of the globe, a barren tract of desert in the Near East (note the absence of any notion of a Fertile Crescent, a term which would be coined only in the 20th Century by James Henry Breasted of the University of Chicago). The Indo-Europeans, on the other hand, were spread from the high mountains of the Himalayas and the great Ganges and Indus River valleys of India in the east, across the great swaths of arable steppe of Eurasia, to the far western outposts of islands in the Atlantic Ocean (Britain, Ireland, and Iceland). Thus, the Indo-Europeans were viewed as a dynamic people, great conquerors, with migratory abilities.

Finally, the linguistic dichotomy was brought into the picture. The multitude of Indo-European languages appeared to demonstrate great diversity, reflective of dynamism and imagination. The Semitic languages, by contrast, are all closely related to one another, a fact which pointed to a lack of imagination.

The dominant figure in *The Languages of Paradise* is Ernest Renan (1823-1892) (nine individuals are discussed in detail; thirty pages are devoted to Renan, while the others average only ten pages each). Much of what is summarized in the three preceding paragraphs is found fully developed in

Renan's writings. Simplicity of lifestyle (i.e., desert life; in Renan's words, Judea is "the saddest country in the world") is paralleled by simplicity of language ("an idiom almost denuded of syntax . . . imagine an Aristotle or a Kant with a similar instrument," Renan wrote). Both, in turn, yield simplicity of thought; could one expect the Semite to possess anything other than one god?

Renan began his career as a seminary student, but he never completed the course of study. Nevertheless, his attachment to Christianity remained strong, in so far as we may define Renan's Christianity as a religion of rationalism, purified of "miracles, superstitions, and other pious nonsense that in his eyes amounted to a negation of the religion of Christ" (p. 77). Thus, not only did Renan need to show the superiority of Aryanism over Semitism, he also needed to demonstrate that Christianity was closer to the former than the latter.

This Renan accomplished through a series of constructs. True, the Semites had developed monotheism, but history "shows how little talent they possessed for propagating the idea or even for using it to combat polytheism. This remained true until the day Christ emerged from their midst" (p. 53). With the arrival of Jesus, Semitic monotheism, which of course meant Judaism, had served its purpose. Henceforth, the religion would be passed to the Aryans. The dynamic and creative polytheism of the Aryans, of course, could not fully accept the pure monotheism of the Semites, and so, posited Renan, Christianity developed as the laxest of the three monotheisms. In this latter opinion, Renan was correct. Both Judaism and Islam, the monotheisms adhered to by Semites, are strictly monotheistic. Christianity, on the other hand, which spread throughout Europe, tolerates "bending the rules" of monotheism (witness the Trinity, the permissibility of physical representations of Jesus, and so on). To us, more than a century after Renan, all of this may sound very weak in its reasoning. But in its day Renan's scholarship ruled supreme. Here it is important to cite Olender's purpose with this book: "The best way to understand [these scholars] is no doubt to take them seriously . . . rather than attempt to impose a logic alien to their time" (p. 17).

The full force of the Semitic-Aryan dichotomy can be seen in the following oft-quoted passage of Renan (unfortunately, not

cited by Olender): "Thus the Semitic race is to be recognized almost entirely by negative characteristics. It has neither mythology, nor epic, nor science, nor philosophy, nor fiction, nor plastic arts, nor civil life; in everything there is a complete absence of complexity, subtlety, or feeling, except for unity. It has no variety in its monotheism." The final attack is made in the one instance in which the Semite permitted variety, at least according to Renan. In his reconstruction of society, the polytheistic Aryan practiced "strict monogamy," whereas the monotheistic Semite was polygamous. The latter practice, Renan proclaimed, was inimical "to the development of all that we call society" (see p. 68).

These strongly held views must be understood in the context of developments in the study of the ancient Near East during Renan's day. At the time he was writing, major discoveries were being made which transformed our knowledge and understanding of the ancient Semitic world: Akkadian was deciphered and new texts came to light with great regularity; the Creation Myth (focusing on the battle between Marduk and Ishtar), the Gilgamesh Epic (with its famous parallel account to the biblical flood story), and legal materials (law codes, contracts, business documents, etc.) were translated and published; and significant objects d'art and other materials from the Semitic world of ancient Babylonia and Assyria were discovered. Everyone involved in oriental studies was aware of the unearthing of this primary material. Certainly Renan knew of them, especially since he was one of the few orientologists of his day actually to visit the Near East; Napoleon III had appointed him head of the French archaeological mission to Syria and Palestine.

Though Olender barely mentions this issue of rediscovered Semitic texts and artifacts, consideration of it further reveals Renan's bias toward his subject and the consequent creation of scholarly myth. For the first time in millennia the writings of ancient polytheistic Semites were speaking to monotheistic Aryan scholars, and yet Renan and his congeners disregarded this evidence to create their own understanding of race, religion, and philology.

One of the few voices raised against Renan was that of Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), the greatest Jewish scholar of his day, though naturally for most of his life the

world of academe was closed to him and he supported himself as the secretary of a Budapest synagogue. Not insignificantly, much of Goldziher's research, especially in the field of Islamic studies, is valid to this day, whereas Renan's work is read only to gain insight into the mind of a 19th-century scholar.

If I may be permitted one scholarly footnote to this entire issue, it is worth noting the view of Oswald Szemerényi, a leading contemporary Indo-Europeanist, who contends that the fatal term *arya* most likely is not of Indo-European origin at all, but is rather a loanword into Iranian from Semitic, as attested to by Ugaritic *ary* "kinsman" and Egyptian *iry* "companion" (see O. Szemerényi, "Studies in the Kinship Terminology of the Indo-European Languages," *Acta Iranica* 16 [1978], pp. 146-49).

Olender's work invites comparison with Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, in particular *Volume I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987). Both of these books shed new light on the 19th-century origins of scholarly myths about Aryans and Semites with their devastating consequences in our own century. For as Jean-Pierre Vernant points out in the foreword to *The Languages of Paradise*, in studying the 19th-century academicians "we cannot today fail to see looming in the background the dark silhouette of the death camps and the rising smoke of the ovens."

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