RICHARD JAMES HORATIO GOTTHEIL 1862-1936

JOSHUA BLOCH
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When Richard J. H. Gotttheil died in New York City, on Friday, May 22, 1896, there was removed from our midst a genial personality, an active scholar, and a teacher whose disciples, many in number, will carry on the traditions of that branch of learning which he endeavored to make better known in the world of scholarship.

Richard Gotttheil was born in Manchester, England, on October 19, 1862. He came of a family of scholars. His father was the eminent preacher, Rabbi Gustav Gotttheil, a German subject, then minister of the Manchester Congregation of British Jews. In 1873 Rabbi Gotttheil was called to the pulpit of Temple Emanu-el, New York City, and went there with his family. He was a distinguished preacher, a scholar of depth, and a saintly man. Rabbi Gotttheil and his family soon became completely identified with the city of their adoption and enjoyed its respect, love, and confidence in an abundant measure. He died in 1903. Richard Gotttheil was about eleven years of age when he arrived in New York City. He received his early education in the public schools and at the Columbia Grammar School—the oldest private school in New York City. Upon completion of his studies at Columbia College in 1881, he was awarded the A. B. degree and proceeded to Europe upon his Wanderjahre. He studied at the universities of Berlin, Tübingen, and Leipzig, where he took his degree (Ph. D. summa cum laude) in 1886. His thesis, A Treatise on Syriac Grammar by Mar(i) Elia of Sotha, Edited and Translated from the Manuscript in Berlin Royal Library, was the forerunner of a large number of studies in the Syriac language and literature which afterwards came from his pen.

Shortly after returning home in 1886, he was appointed instructor in Syriac language and literature at Columbia College. This

1 The last published work by Dr. Gotttheil, issued shortly before his death, is a biography of his father entitled The Life of Gustav Gotttheil, Memoir of a Priest in Israel, Williamsport, Pa., 1936.

2 Berlin: W. Feiler Verlag, 1887.
courses students from the various Christian theological schools. As a Jew, he no doubt had his convictions and beliefs. Yet these were not in conflict with the results of scholarship. He felt that whatever differences might arise among scholars concerning the higher criticism of the Old Testament, they could not properly be disposed of by repeating the old dogmatic affirmations concerning the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. He rightly believed that exegesis is a historical science, and should be pursued by historical methods. Without in any way offending the conservative position, he accepted the viewpoint and methodology of the higher critical school. This school was then at the height of its campaign against orthodox resistance to the “evolutionary” approach to the literature of the Bible and the life-experience underlying it. With no mean ability and with considerable dignity Gottheil constantly endeavored to enlighten and to expand the horizon of the students by pointing out that the Hebrew religion was chiefly the product of social experience and that the record of that experience in the Hebrew Bible is but a fragment surviving from a much larger body of Hebrew literature which has now perished. His judgment was formed deliberately, conditioned by an unprejudiced consideration of all the evidence.

Gottheil was not very much concerned with the noise that was made about the “higher criticism,” but he was glad to see that it brought the Old Testament into the focus of controversial interest, and that there was an extraordinary revival of the study of Hebrew not only in theological seminaries but in college as well. It is unfortunate that this revival was of short duration. Though Gottheil had accepted the methodology and the conclusions of modern criticism of Hebrew Scriptures and of the concomitant reconstruction of the history and religion of the ancient Hebrews, he took little part in the special investigations which so largely engrossed the labors of his contemporaries in Old Testament research. In fact he published very little of importance in that field.

As a very active teacher and communal worker he had too many other things to do to become a critic or an exegete pure and simple. He felt that a larger share of his time and energy should be devoted to his interests in the synagogue, in Zionism, in the problems affecting the welfare of his people everywhere rather than to the more secluded work of the scholar with its limiting purview. To be

sure, Gottheil was not unmindful of the fact that as a professional scholar he had obligations to discharge; however, he was not a pedant; nothing human was foreign to his interest. He was a man of dignity and weight among his peers and at the same time full of charm and geniality. Yet he was possessed of a native modesty which showed itself in a certain degree of reserve. To the chance acquaintance this might seem coldness but nearer association discovered in him a warmth of human interest beyond and above that of the average man, which had not been suspected at first. His self-possession and the courage with which he pursued an active interest in matters and issues—dear to him, but not always popular with others—are recalled with great admiration even by those who rarely shared his views or enthusiasm. In matters that appeared determinable to him, Gottheil had positive opinions, clearly defined and firmly held, but without controversial zeal. In the course of his life Gottheil found himself engaged in several polemical issues, but while the world loves a fracas, he abhorred bickering and quarreling.

To a unique degree Gottheil was at once scholar and teacher and learner, attaining his honors in the former capacities because he was always humble in learning. His writings are characterized by a transparent clearness of expression, lucidity of style, and fine discrimination. His teachings were marked by similar qualities. He was lucid in his exposition and always calm and judicious. He seems to have maintained a youthful enthusiasm for his chosen subject and displayed much care in initiating his disciples in the intricacies of Semitic scholarship. Yet, one could not call Gottheil an “inspiring teacher.” He had no oratorical power, no compelling voice or manner. To some, perhaps even to many of his pupils, he at times appeared somewhat dry and uninteresting as a teacher. But to those who had concern in his subject he was exceedingly helpful, for his keen analysis and his precise manner of statement made all his teaching luminous. His voice was extraordinary. A calmness pervaded his speech. One rarely noticed any passion in him. His students recognized him for what he was, a personality—rugged and austere in his scholarly ideals, yet most genial and kindly in personal relations.

Gottheil’s long career as a teacher, his thoroughly scientific attitude, and his generous and kindly spirit, together with his
in that long and impressive list of his writings compiled by his faithful assistant, Miss Ida Pratt, there is presented a record of the numerous literary contributions which Dr. Goethei made during the long academic career spanning more than half a century of productive research work. Since the publication of _A List of Plants_, an ancient Syriac nomenclature of botanic lore, he made frequent contributions to the learned publications in various lands devoted to the treatment of such subjects. His description of a proposed edition of _The Syriac-Arabic Glosses of Bar 'Ali_ led to the eventual publication of the work. Concerned with the popularization of those subjects which he made his specialty, Dr. Goethei took an active part, both as editor and contributor, in the preparation of encyclopedic works. Numerous authoritative articles from his pen appear in _The Jewish Encyclopedia_; _The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge_; _Hasting's Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics_; _The Encyclopedia Britannica_; _Johnson's Encyclopedia_; _The International Encyclopedia_; _The National Encyclopedia_; _The Standard Jewish Encyclopedia_ (now in the making); _Warner's World's Best Literature_; _Harper's Encyclopedia of United States History_, and others. His book reviews invariably offered additional or corrective knowledge to that contained in the work under review. Curiously enough, he was also fond of genealogical research. An admirable work in this field in his sumptuous publication _The Belmont-Belmonte Family: A Record of 400 Years_ (New York, 1917). It is a readable presentation of an interesting Jewish family record. Bibliography too claimed his attention, and interesting contributions from his pen appeared in the pages of the _Zeitschrift für hebräische Bibliographie_ and of the _Bulletin of The New York Public Library_. His useful bibliography of the works of Paul Anton de Lagarde appeared in the _Proceedings of the American Oriental Society_, 1893.

In collaboration with Professor Morris Jastrow, Jr., he edited the 

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* His first publication was _A List of Plants and Their Properties from the Moderna Herbaria of Greco-Roman Bar 'Ali_ (Berlin, 1888), viii + 20 pp. Cf. "Berichtigungen und Zusätze zu 'A list of plants,'" _ZDMG_ 43 (1889), 151-137.
* See above, note 3.
very useful Semitic Study Series consisting of Semitic texts for the
use of students. He was also the editor of the Columbia University
Oriental Studies and jointly with Professor John D. Prince issued
the series of Contributions to Oriental History and Philology. Dr.
Gottheil was always glad to participate in Festschriften issued in
honor of his colleagues and peers. How regrettable that the publica-
tion of a Tribute Volume—all ready for the printer on the occasion
of his seventieth birthday—had to be abandoned because of the
economic depression. A

For many years Professor Gottheil took an active interest in
learned societies both at home and abroad. He was a member and
one of the founders of the Committee of American Lectures on
the History of Religion, which brought the subject to the attention
of our colleges and of the public by securing the best lecturers,
American and foreign, in the respective fields. He served as trustee,
officer, and member of many learned societies. He held the offices
of president in The American Society of Biblical Literature, The
American Oriental Society, and in 1909-10 served as Director of
the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. In 1921
he served as exchange professor at the University of Strasbourg.
He was on the Boards of trustees of The Jewish Institute of
Religion and the Educational Alliance.

He had a passion for the espousal of the welfare of his people
everywhere, and took an active part in improving their social and
cultural position. As charter member and vice-president of the
American Jewish Historical Society, he was concerned with the
study and research in their history. As founder and first Nasi
of the Zeta Beta Tau fraternity, he endeavored to strengthen
Jewish academic fraternal life. As an ardent Zionist he was among
the first to rally to the call of Dr. Theodor Herzl and served as
first president of the Zionist Organization in America. He was
also the first to give to the English readers a readable history of
that movement. Any cause that elicited his interest found in him
an ardent champion. For the zealous and courageous support of
the Allied cause in the World War he was awarded the rosette of the
Legion of Honor. Amidst the absorbing pursuits of scholar-
ship and communal service he found time for frequent contributions
to the columns of the daily newspapers, often on matters contro-
versial.

A word must be said about his place in The New York Public
Library. At an early date, in 1896, he joined that band of workers,
who, with Dr. John Shaw Billings, its first Director, shared in the
transformation of the Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations into
one of the greatest libraries in the world. As chief of its Oriental
Division he revealed a splendid love for and appreciation of books
and a sympathetic understanding of their readers. He performed
his duties with patience and enthusiasm. Under his direction a
number of very useful bibliographical works were issued by the
Library. Altogether, he rendered distinguished service to the cause
of learning wherever called upon to do so.

Prof. Gottheil will be remembered not only for his many achieve-
ments as scholar and teacher, and his courageous leadership in the
cause of learning, but also for his full personality, the captivating
charm of his gentle dignity, and a winsome graciousness of
manner. His physical presence will be greatly missed in the life
of the community in which he moved, in its social affairs, in the
fellowship of scholars, but the influence of his work will endure as
a lasting monument to his memory.

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* In this series he published: A Selection from the Syriac Jewish Romance,
Edited with a Complete Glossary in English and German, Leiden: E. J.
Brill, 1908. xii + 199 pp. (Semitic Study Series, no. 7.)

* See G. A. Robinson in Columbia University Quarterly, v. 25, June 1933,

* See his article "Zionism," in the Jewish Encyclopedia, v. 12, pp. 666-
668; in the New Schaff-Herford Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, v. 12,
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