



JOHN ADNEY EMERTON

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1928–2015

DURING HIS TIME AS REGIUS PROFESSOR of Hebrew at the University of Cambridge John Emerton stood at the forefront of international research on the Hebrew Bible and related disciplines. In addition he assumed significant administrative positions and was tireless in several editorial roles, while at the same time he gave leadership in teaching during a period when the faculties in Cambridge in this field were exceptionally strong.

I

The path to this position was clear enough once he had embarked on his academic studies at Oxford in 1947, but there was nothing in his family background to explain his particular choice of subject for his first degree. He was born on 5 June 1928 in Winchmore Hill in North London as a first son to Adney Spencer Emerton and Helena Mary (née Quin). His father was an accountant with the family firm which became United Dairies. In 1938 the family moved the short distance to an area of Southgate known as Lakenheath, which meant that John attended Minchenden School there. He was clearly successful, gaining entrance to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, to read Theology. This was from the start a response to his strong sense of vocation to the Anglican ministry, fulfilled by ordination some five years later. This vocation was nurtured primarily at school and at the local Anglican church. Some of his Minchenden friends were committed Christians; of them, some were later ordained and Emerton kept in touch with them throughout his life. In addition, the friendly vicar,

the church services and the youth group in the strongly evangelical Anglican church local to his home became important to him. They taught him to read the Bible and at first to adopt a rather puritan lifestyle. His tutor at Corpus, Christopher Evans,¹ was certainly an influential figure in educating him initially into wider intellectual pastures.

While studying for his first BA he quickly learned to appreciate in particular the teaching of Hebrew Old Testament texts by the Reader in Semitic Philology in the Faculty of Oriental Studies, G. R. Driver.² He was also inspired by the lectures of the Jewish scholar Chaim Rabin. Thus it came about that while completing his formal training for ordination at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford he also studied for a second BA in Oriental Studies. This comprised principally further study in Hebrew (including post-Biblical Hebrew) and Aramaic (including especially Syriac), but other Semitic languages were not ignored as important cognate material; it is remembered especially that while he was attending lectures relevant to an ecclesiastical vocation a grammar of Ugaritic or whatever might well be simultaneously studied under the desk.

Those two years were important in other ways than merely gaining another first class BA to add to his previous one in Theology. He was a member of a student Bible discussion group and was painfully shy in social terms. Another member, a young woman called Norma Bennington, who was studying natural sciences (including the study of crystallography with Dorothy Hodgkin), had accepted an invitation by a member of the group to learn Arabic with him for an hour a week. John inquired whether she might like to add Hebrew to her repertoire. Hebrew being a language in which the greater part of the Bible was written, she agreed, and it was some time before she realised that he had ulterior motives. Eventually matters became clearer and in the long run Hebrew trumped Arabic. John and Norma were married two years after he had left Oxford and by then was in Durham, and, as we shall see, it is difficult now to imagine how his career might otherwise have developed.

Following ordination in 1952 John went for one year to Birmingham as a curate in the Cathedral and also as an assistant lecturer in the University. This was about as close as he ever came to what we might call a conventional church appointment, and a career in that direction was

¹ See M. D. Hooker, 'Christopher Francis Evans, 1909–2012', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XIII (Oxford, 2014), pp. 195–214.

² See Emerton's own appreciative biographical memoir, 'Godfrey Rolles Driver, 1892–1975', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 63 (1977), pp. 345–62, reprinted in C. E. Bosworth (ed.), *A Century of British Orientalists (1902–2001)* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 103–19.

never seriously considered. This should not be misinterpreted to indicate that his ordination was somehow insignificant. As already mentioned, he had a very strong sense of vocation, and although this was never a matter for display in any academic setting it was an underlying motivation behind much of what he did. He always played a supportive role in college chapel or local parish church (he favoured especially conducting the early morning communion service and he was devoted to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer). Moreover as a teacher of many who were making the transition from an uninformed faith to trying to come to terms with the results of responsible biblical scholarship he could be sympathetic, if never compromising, having himself trodden that same path years before.

The procedures for academic appointments in those days were not always quite as they are today. During Emerton's year in Birmingham Professor T. W. Thacker, an Egyptologist with an interest in Semitic studies and Director of the School of Oriental Studies in the University of Durham, wrote to Driver to ask if he knew of anyone who would be capable of teaching Hebrew. In consequence Emerton was appointed as lecturer in Hebrew and Aramaic at Durham. Driver's influence was equally influential two years later when Emerton was appointed as a lecturer in the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge, a post he held for seven years from 1955. All this was without a doctorate or any publications whatsoever, but rested simply on a star-studded undergraduate career which included winning several prizes such as the Canon Hall Junior Greek Testament Prize and the Hall-Houghton Junior Septuagint Prize—the Senior Prize followed a couple of years later—and also being the Kennicott Hebrew Fellow in his last undergraduate year (which no doubt also helped an Anglican ordinand financially).

II

Although Emerton's reputation came over time to be firmly centred on his expertise in many aspects of Old Testament study (and this was the subject he was first appointed to teach in Cambridge), the range of subjects on which he published in those early years is already marked by astonishing breadth. Perhaps surprisingly, several of his first published articles concerned New Testament subjects.³ He used to enjoy attending the senior

³Forty-eight of Emerton's articles were published shortly before his death in G. Davies and R. Gordon (eds.), *Studies on the Language and Literature of the Bible: Selected Works of J. A.*

New Testament seminar in those days (led at that time by C. F. D. Moule⁴) and always regretted that pressure of other duties prevented him from continuing with this when he later returned to Cambridge in a more senior position. No doubt several of his earliest articles had a first airing in that setting, not least his proposed explanation for the number of fish—153—recorded in John's gospel as having been caught during one of Jesus's post-resurrection appearances (*SLLB* 41). He reports that he was aware of eighteen previous suggested explanations. His own, a nineteenth, evidently occurred to him in bed one night, as Norma ruefully recalls.⁵ The language that Jesus spoke⁶ and the Aramaic background of the words of institution in the Eucharist (*SLLB* 40 and 42) are among several other such articles.

Second, two articles relate to the Aramaic portions of the book of Daniel, one of which has become a classic (*SLLB* 31). In the vision described in Daniel 7 the seer sees one 'like the son of man' approaching 'the Ancient of Days', and the importance of this for New Testament scholarship relating to Jesus as well as the history of Old Testament religion is obvious. In his article Emerton developed a whole new way of tackling the question of the origins of this imagery by appeal to the descriptions of the god El and one of his sons, Baal, as known from the second millennium BCE Ugaritic texts. Though Ugarit/Ras Shamra is sited on the coast of modern Syria it is clear that the religion of its inhabitants had much in common with that of the Southern Levant as a whole, often dubbed 'Canaanite'. There are many points of comparison and contrast, in terms of language, literature and religion, with the world of the subsequent Old Testament, and the conclusion of Emerton's study was that 'the enthronement of the Son of man by an aged deity goes back to Canaanite myth and ritual, and that behind the figure of the Son of man lies Yahwe, and ultimately Baal'. How could this be explained, given that we are

Emerton (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum*, 165; Leiden, 2015). Where an article to which I refer in the following is included in this volume I cite it as *SLLB*, followed by the number of the article in the volume. He published a total of more than 130 articles in journals and invited contributions to books.

⁴See W. Horbury, 'Charles Francis Digby Moule, 1908–2007', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows*, VIII (Proceedings of the British Academy 161; Oxford, 2009), pp. 281–310; among several pages descriptive of the seminar in this memoir, Emerton's participation is noted on p. 291.

⁵The solution involves a somewhat complicated form of *gematria* based on the place names in Ezekiel 47:10 and the mathematical relation between 17 and 153, the latter being the sum total of every number from 1 to 17. It is perhaps not necessary to rehearse all the details here.

⁶See J. A. Emerton, 'Did Jesus speak Hebrew?', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series 12 (1961), 189–202, and see too his later and broader *SLLB* 44 (1973).

dealing with texts written some thousand or more years apart? Emerton's proposal was that memories of the older mythological narratives were preserved in the Jerusalem cult tradition, the city having been Canaanite/Jebusite before it fell into Israelite hands. It is now commonplace to detect comparable links between Canaanite and Israelite religious traditions in the Psalms, most obviously, and also elsewhere, not least in apocalyptic literature. While such comparisons were not wholly new with Emerton's article, there can be no doubt with the advantage of hindsight that his work here helped bring such research into the mainstream. It is also of note that in this article he already showed mastery of the Ugaritic sources alongside the Aramaic, and later he was to publish several articles that dealt with particular problems in those texts (e.g. *SLLB* 25, 26 and 28), as well as a useful survey of the field as a whole.⁷

The third area of his early research is one for which he is not, perhaps, always given the credit he deserves, not least because it is centred in a part of the field much less frequently entered. The Hebrew Bible was translated into several languages during the centuries which precede by some way the manuscripts of the Hebrew text which we have available to us now. Printed Hebrew Bibles are usually based on a manuscript from the start of the second Christian millennium, well over a thousand years, therefore, after the time when the texts were first written. Of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls take us back long before that, more or less to the turn of the eras, and although the whole of the Hebrew Bible has not survived among them enough of it has to have transformed our understanding of the preservation and transmission of the text in those early centuries. Despite this, the value of the early translations for textual criticism as well as for the light that they shed on their host communities remains important. Pride of place goes to the Greek translation, usually referred to as the Septuagint. It is of pre-Christian origin and has a complicated transmission history of its own. Emerton contributed to one aspect of that in his early years,⁸ but far more innovative was his work on the Syriac Peshitta. The main focus of his attention at first, however, was not a book that was translated from the Hebrew Bible but rather from the Apocrypha, being originally composed in Greek, and thus it is not as widely known outside specialist circles as it might otherwise have been.

⁷J. A. Emerton, 'What light has Ugaritic shed on Hebrew?', in G. J. Brooke, A. H. W. Curtis and J. F. Healey (eds.), *Ugarit and the Bible: Proceedings of the International Symposium on Ugarit and the Bible, Manchester, September 1992* (Münster, 1994), pp. 53–69.

⁸J. A. Emerton, 'The purpose of the second column of the Hexapla', *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series 7 (1956), 79–87; see too his later *SLLB* 43 (1971).

While still the Kennicott Hebrew Fellow in Oxford (and thus while still reading for his second BA), he took up a suggestion from W. D. McHardy⁹ that he might undertake a critical edition of the Syriac Peshitta of the Wisdom of Solomon (quite why that particular book is not recorded). This work, which in some respects could be thought of as the equivalent of a doctoral project,¹⁰ occupied him, along with his other teaching and smaller research projects, over the next six or seven years. In his 100-page introduction he documents how he tried to get access to all available manuscript sources in European and American collections, arguing that ‘there should be an edition of at least one book for which an attempt has been made to collate every available ms’. These are then described each in turn and grouped into their appropriate textual families. Not all by any means contribute directly to the establishment of the original text (so far as this can be done), but of course they all have their part to play in the history of the Syriac-speaking Church. The edition itself which follows is based on a manuscript from the Ambrosian Library in Milan and is accompanied by a full critical apparatus.

Apart from the importance of this work in its own right, it needs to be set in its context in the history of Peshitta studies. Indeed, this history may partially explain McHardy’s original suggestion. In 1959, the year in which Emerton’s volume was published, the Peshitta Project was formally established in Leiden in the Netherlands. It had a prehistory, however, for in 1953 at the first Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (which rather remarkably, by the way, Emerton already attended) the Danish scholar E. Hammershaimb proposed that the Organization should consider the question of the preparation of a critical edition of the Old Testament Peshitta. In taking this up, the Organization set up an Advisory Committee under the chairmanship of D. Winton Thomas, Regius Professor of Hebrew in Cambridge, and one to whom Emerton in his Preface pays a handsome tribute for all his support and careful reading of his draft. McHardy was another scholar who was closely consulted at the time, and at the 1956 Congress (the Organization has a Congress every three years) he was invited to serve as editor-in-chief of an accompanying *editio minor*, though he withdrew in

⁹McHardy was at that time Samuel Davidson Professor of Old Testament Studies in King’s College London, but he lived in Oxford where he had previously been lecturer in Aramaic and Syriac and where he was later to become the Regius Professor of Hebrew. He will thus have been a close colleague when Emerton returned to Oxford in 1962.

¹⁰In fact in 1960 he was awarded a Cambridge BD for it, a senior degree usually based on published work.

1959 without much having been accomplished. At the Congress held that same year in Oxford under the presidency of Driver, the project was formally established with Professor Piet de Boer of Leiden as editor.

Emerton was already in touch with de Boer as he prepared his edition, and it was a relationship that became even more important later in his career. De Boer was enormously active during the 1950s and 1960s, networking with the widest possible spectrum of scholars in the field of Old Testament and related studies, and he was a real entrepreneur in the matter of establishing publication outlets. More immediately relevant, he was at this time also busy collecting microfilmed copies of manuscripts of the Peshitta from the Middle East as well as from occidental libraries. Among his correspondence,¹¹ only a part of which is extant, a letter from Driver (22 March 1959) thanks him for 'being so good to Emerton; he is one of my most promising pupils in recent years'. Two relevant letters from Emerton himself survive in that particular collection. In one (18 August 1958), which is principally about some quite unrelated matter, he reports that 'my work on the Peshitta of Wisdom is slowly but steadily nearing completion. I hope to finish it in the next few weeks', and on 11 October he sent the typescript itself with a covering letter saying 'I am very grateful to you for the interest which you have shown in this work of mine. I hope that you will find it satisfactory.' He asked de Boer to consider it for a new monograph series which he had just established, *Studia Post-Biblica* (which had both Thomas and McHardy on its board at that time). It seems clear from this that de Boer was indeed aware of the work (the Preface thanks him for accepting the work for publication and says that he 'has helped me in several other ways') but that he had not, so to speak, supervised it, as one might otherwise have supposed.

Be that as it may, Emerton's edition clearly served very much as a template for the new project, and he was in close and frequent correspondence with de Boer about his own pioneering contribution to it during its early years.¹² This was an edition of the Song of Songs. About sixty letters from Emerton survive, and the spread of dates (for instance, nothing from 1962 or 1964) suggests that these are not complete. Many of the letters take

¹¹ His archives are housed now in the Leiden University Library. I am most grateful to Professor Arie van der Kooij for facilitating my access.

¹² The files of the Peshitta Project, originally kept in its rooms in Leiden, have now been moved, together with the Project itself, to Amsterdam. I am grateful to several of its former and present research workers (in particular Dr K. D. Jenner) for comments and for permission to access this material and especially to Mr G. J. Veltman for providing me with copies of Emerton's letters there.

more space explaining why he has been delayed by teaching, examining, and other commitments from progressing as fast as he could have wished than on the particular matter in hand, but nevertheless he also reports on weeks or fortnights spent on the work in vacations, collating manuscripts (with de Boer sometimes sending along microfilms or photographs of ones not previously considered), discussing how exactly the apparatus should be formatted, and so on. He is aware that he is in some senses setting a benchmark for those who will follow him and he is anxious constantly to revise his first drafts in the light of lessons learned later. He was also assiduous in fund raising, mainly from Oxford and Cambridge trust funds, to support the publication.

Several times in these letters he states that after the edition of the Song of Songs he wishes next to prepare the edition of Leviticus, and a 1962 article I mention later (*SLLB* 32) suggests that he was already working on this. On 26 December 1961, for instance, he wrote that he hoped (but could not promise) to complete it by the end of 1963. No letter in the collection that I have seen, however, explains why this failed to materialise, nor is it mentioned in the Preface to the edition of Leviticus when it eventually appeared.¹³ It can only be surmised that the pressures of time when he moved to Oxford delayed progress and perhaps that when he was elected to the chair in Cambridge he felt that he should devote his main energies to more mainstream Hebrew and Old Testament projects.

When the Peshitta Project published a sample edition in 1966, Emerton's new edition of the Song of Songs stood as the first item.¹⁴ Dr Piet Dirksen, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the Peshitta of Judges¹⁵

¹³D. J. Lane et al., *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version, I/ii and I/i b: Leviticus—Numbers—Deuteronomy—Joshua* (Leiden, 1991).

¹⁴J. A. Emerton (ed.), *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version, Sample Edition: Song of Songs—Tobit—4 Ezra* (Leiden, 1966). Interest in this particular book may have been stimulated by his work as part of the team that was responsible for the Song of Songs in the *New English Bible*.

¹⁵See P. B. Dirksen, *The Transmission of the Text in the Peshitta Manuscripts of the Book of Judges* (Monographs of the Peshitta Institute 1; Leiden, 1972). In his account of the history of the Project Dirksen writes that 'The harbinger was J. A. Emerton's *The Peshitta of the Wisdom of Solomon*, which appeared in the year the Peshitta Project made its start, and may to a great extent be regarded as a model for a number of other studies' (P. B. Dirksen, 'In retrospect', in W. Th. van Peursen and R. B. ter Haar Romeny [eds.], *Text, Translation, and Tradition: Studies on the Peshitta and its Use in the Syriac Tradition Presented to Konrad D. Jenner on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* [Monographs of the Peshitta Institute 14; Leiden, 2006], pp. 25–37 [29]). For comparable remarks, see P. A. H. de Boer, in the preface to *The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version, I/i: Genesis – Exodus* (Leiden, 1977), p. vi.

and later became a director of the Project (1982–93), wrote to tell me that the Introduction to Emerton's edition of *Wisdom*

provided a framework for ordering and analyzing the textual material for Judges. It might be maintained that Emerton's approach was the only possible way to do this type of analysis anyway, but someone had to find out, clear the path, and set the example for others. That person was Emerton ... Emerton's monograph marks a new start in Peshitta research, called for by the Peshitta Project and, linked with it, the availability of a great many Peshitta mss.

Later, in the light of continuing experience, it was decided that the project should restrict its edition to manuscripts only up until the twelfth century (something with which Emerton himself wholeheartedly agreed;¹⁶ indeed, it is likely that he had been an active participant in the discussions which led to this decision). Both of his editions later appeared in revised format in 1979 (with the revision undertaken by David Lane¹⁷). The importance of his scholarly contribution to the project in its early years thus deserves wider recognition than it has generally received.

It will be convenient to note here that these editions did not exhaust his contributions to Syriac studies. In addition to a study of printed editions of the Song of Songs (1967), he wrote an influential article with the unpromising title of 'Unclean birds and the origin of the Peshitta' (*SLLB* 32) as a contribution to the unresolved question whether the Peshitta is of Jewish or of Christian origin. Later on he also prepared the best translation available of the Odes of Solomon¹⁸ and accompanied that by two substantial articles (and a shorter one co-authored with R. P. Gordon) in which he discussed specific textual and linguistic points in that text.

In addition to these research projects during this period Emerton also worked on the Biblical text in ways that would be of benefit to the wider church. First, under Driver's chairmanship in the 1950s and 1960s he contributed to the *New English Bible* Old Testament translation, including the Song of Songs and Isaiah. Second, working with Winton Thomas from 1959 to 1962 he helped with the revision of the liturgical Psalter for the Church of England. Third, in the late 1960s and 1970s he was invited by the British and Foreign Bible Society (now the Bible Society) to chair a

¹⁶In a letter dated 13 December 1974 he wrote that he 'agree[s] entirely and enthusiastically with the general changes proposed for printing the text and the apparatus'.

¹⁷*The Old Testament in Syriac According to the Peshitta Version, II/v: Proverbs – Wisdom of Solomon – Ecclesiastes – Song of Songs* (Leiden, 1979). The main differences relate to conformity to the revised terms of reference for the edition.

¹⁸J. A. Emerton, 'The Odes of Solomon', in H. F. D. Sparks (ed.), *The Apocryphal Old Testament* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 683–731.

Cambridge group of Hebraists producing a translators' translation. This was a version in simplified English to serve as an accurate and reliable basic text for overseas translators in local languages who knew some English but no Hebrew or Greek.

III

When Driver retired in 1962 it was, perhaps, inevitable that Emerton should apply and be appointed as his successor as Reader in Semitic Philology and he became a Fellow of St Peter's College, Oxford. There can be no doubt that it was Driver who was Emerton's closest and most valued mentor and it was appropriate that Emerton dedicated his edition of the *Wisdom of Solomon* to him 'in gratitude for teaching, encouragement and help'—this despite the fact that Syriac was not a field of Semitic studies to which Driver himself made any very great contribution.¹⁹ They maintained a regular and frequent correspondence on Biblical Hebrew, both of them in almost illegible handwriting, for the rest of Driver's life, each of them consulting and advising the other as equal collaborators and close friends.

Emerton now assumed the mantle of one who taught long hours by reading through large portions of the Hebrew Bible with particular attention to textual criticism and philology. Thus besides many other texts he worked right through Proverbs, for instance, on a three-year cycle, and Psalms on a five-year cycle. There were also classes on such related subjects as epigraphy, Ugaritic and Semitic philology generally. The same continued when, in 1968, he was elected Regius Professor of Hebrew in Cambridge, where he remained for the rest of his career, retiring in 1995. As Regius Professor he was a foundation member of Trinity College until he retired, and he held a Fellowship at St John's College from 1970, renewed until his death. Two or three hours of teaching most mornings was not unusual, and this was sometimes quietly extended to, for instance, taking an individual (as it might be, a New Testament PhD student) through basic Syriac grammar or the like if there was nobody else available to do so.

¹⁹The only exception is his share in the joint edition by G. R. Driver and L. Hodgson of *The Bazaar of Heracleides, Newly Translated from the Syriac and Edited with an Introduction, Notes & Appendices* (Oxford, 1925).

It was out of this teaching schedule that many of his subsequent articles arose. His preparation was so thorough in its attention to the full range of primary sources that he would come up with fresh ideas for the solution of old problems, as well, sometimes, as spotting new difficulties and proposing answers. These 'textual notes', as they have been somewhat modestly labelled (e.g. *SLLB* 10–24), typically took the form of a full explanation of how the received text has been understood in antiquity and in more recent scholarship and of why nevertheless there still remains a difficulty, a survey of relevant evidence from the ancient versions and the possible light shed by related Semitic languages on difficult vocabulary, a rigorous examination of proposed modern solutions by emendation or in other ways, and then a new proposal for a solution from one direction or another. Such studies are naturally of immense value in their treatment of any given passage, and it is helpful to have the ground cleared of so much accumulated discussion so as to sharpen the focus on the nub of the issue. Precision, clarity, sensible caution and exactitude were his hallmarks. Whether his solutions were always convincing is a matter for each to decide. My own impression has been that he was never simply wrong but equally that he was unlikely always to have been right: while some of his solutions are fully persuasive others do not always carry conviction in terms of probability.

That does nothing to lessen the importance of the body of work as a whole, however, because he exemplifies a method that was in need of emphasis during the closing decades of the twentieth century. Until the early decades of the century, scholars confronted with a textual difficulty had little choice but to consult the ancient versions and then either defend the indefensible or propose an emendation which could rarely rise above the level of the conjectural. During the twentieth century knowledge of closely related languages was either added from scratch on the basis of new discoveries (e.g. Akkadian, Ugaritic) or advanced very considerably (e.g. several forms of Aramaic). Evidence from inscriptions in Hebrew also accumulated steadily. (Evidence from Arabic had already been exploited in the medieval period, so that though it was much invoked during the period under discussion it was never likely to prove so fruitful.) In some circles proposals for new meanings of words based on these cognate languages piled up in a completely undisciplined manner, and Emerton was by no means the only scholar to sense the danger.²⁰ The difference was

²⁰Mention has naturally to be made of J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968); see too E. Nicholson and J. Barton, 'James Barr, 1924–2006',

that his initial enthusiasm for Old Testament scholarship as a whole had been fired precisely by the inspirational teaching of a leader in this field and one to whom he remained loyal and grateful even as he came gradually to question some of his more excessive results. His articles thus evince something of an attempt to do more sympathetic justice to the work of Driver and his colleagues than some other critics allowed, while at the same time being unafraid to combine that with a return to the best procedures of the older school. His method was therefore thoroughly eclectic in the best sense of the word. There is no 'one approach fits all' method but a careful weighing of all possible evidence, leading sometimes down one road and sometimes another towards the favoured solution. Only one with an incomparable command of the wide breadth of sources would be able to achieve this.

Two points deserve mention here. First, Emerton was honest enough to admit that he gradually changed his approach in the direction of moderation during the course of his career. In 1995, the year of his retirement, he served as President of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, with its Congress taking place in Cambridge. In his presidential paper (*SLLB* 1) he reflected on 'Comparative Semitic philology and Hebrew lexicography'. Among other points, he recalls his undergraduate days when he was 'delighted to sit at Driver's feet, excited by every lecture of his that I heard'. At the same time, the Regius Professor then was Herbert Danby, a scholar steeped in Jewish learning and whose reading of the text derived exclusively from an interpretation based on the traditional virtue of careful grammatical study as understood within inherited tradition, represented especially by the great medieval Jewish commentators. 'At the time, I tended to regard Danby's teaching as unimaginative.' Over time, however, Emerton came to a far greater appreciation of Danby's strengths, recognising them as a vital ingredient for sound textual analysis while at the same time developing stricter controls that should govern the comparative philological method, which he sets out at length in his paper. He concludes, 'I believe we need to combine the approaches of Driver and Danby—and also any more recent approaches that have proved their value. In a sense, both Driver and Danby were right.'

Second, Emerton was entirely open to changing his mind if evidence to the contrary was presented. Unlike some who defend their previous

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows, VII (Proceedings of the British Academy 153; Oxford, 2008), pp. 25–51.

positions even after they clearly become untenable, his quest was not for his personal reputation but for an honest evaluation of evidence as best it was known. This was dramatically illustrated in the case relating to his assessment of part of the work of his predecessor in the Cambridge chair, D. Winton Thomas, whose help early on in Emerton's career we have already noted. Throughout his time in Cambridge, and even before, Thomas had argued that the Hebrew verb *yada'* ('to know', as usually understood) actually combined two different words, the second of which (based on Arabic evidence) meant 'be still, quiet, at rest', and in the causative theme 'to make submissive, to humiliate'. This second meaning, which was then also read back into the simple form of the verb, was proposed by Thomas for an increasing number of passages in the Old Testament in a long series of short notes and studies. His theory was widely, though by no means universally, accepted at the time.

Soon after he arrived in Cambridge, Emerton chose to gather all these proposals together and to evaluate them in the light of criticisms which had been made. Since he came to the conclusion that Thomas was usually right, it was a nice appreciative gesture by the newcomer.²¹ Years later, however, Professor William Johnstone of Aberdeen read a paper at a conference in Leuven which effectively demolished the most significant parts of Thomas's use of Arabic in this connection and which therefore also rendered most of Emerton's work on the subject redundant.²² I was present on that occasion and well remember how quickly Emerton insisted that Johnstone should publish the paper in the journal which he edited, *Vetus Testamentum*,²³ and how he himself wrote another article (*SLLB* 6) soon after, revisiting the whole question in the light of this improved understanding. It always seemed to me a rather courageous thing to have done rather than just keeping quiet.

Alongside this textual and linguistic research Emerton also wrote a wide variety of articles on literary and historical problems in the Old Testament. It had been an ambition since his earliest days to write a commentary on the book of Genesis and quite a number of articles

²¹ J. A. Emerton, 'A consideration of some alleged meanings of *yd'* in Hebrew', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 15 (1970), 145–80. We may note too his much later appreciative though not uncritical article 'The work of David Winton Thomas as a Hebrew scholar', *Vetus Testamentum*, 41 (1991), 287–303.

²² Emerton did not claim expertise in Arabic. He had consulted a colleague in Arabic studies about the matter when he wrote his first article and received reassurance on the subject. Without any malice he later accepted that he had been unintentionally misled in this regard.

²³ W. Johnstone, 'YD' II, "Be humbled, humiliated"?'', *Vetus Testamentum*, 41 (1991), 49–62.

focused on specific problems arising from that book. He took a relatively conventional position with regard to the history of composition based on four discrete sources, and sometimes he defended this position against alternatives, whether from the more conservative angle that defended its authorial unity or from those who, for instance, dated it all far later than he preferred. Again, however, his choice of subjects for study was far from narrow, and articles could be mentioned that treated subjects relevant to Deuteronomy (a significant piece which has stood the test of time), Judges, Isaiah, the Psalms, Proverbs and Ezra-Nehemiah.

In addition he kept abreast of epigraphic discoveries and their significance not only for linguistic matters but also for wider historical and religious issues as well. One that stands out and has been cited repeatedly concerns the discovery of some inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, about 50km south of Kadesh-Barnea (*SLLB* 27; see also 30). As he once said, seeing these on display in the Israel Museum long before their official publication, he came out of the exhibition with the idea for an article in his head. That idea concerned only a question of grammar, however, and fortunately before publishing it he developed it into a major discussion of the question prompted by these inscriptions as to whether the Israelite God Yahweh had a consort Asherah (he argued more than once that the word in these texts is better understood as a reference to asherah as a cult symbol rather than to the goddess herself, while not denying that Asherah was worshipped as a goddess in some forms of Israelite religion).

The spread of Emerton's other academic commitments during his years as Regius Professor, yet to be described, meant that his style of work was best suited to the writing of articles on which he would work with furious concentration for relatively short periods of time. He always hoped that he would be able also to complete three major books—a commentary on Genesis for the New Century Bible Commentary series and commentaries on Song of Songs and Isaiah chapters 28–39 for the International Critical Commentary. To those who knew him best during those years it always seemed questionable whether these would ever be completed, and by the time retirement came his pattern of working was perhaps too firmly established to allow him to break free. I always thought that he would be a superb lexicographer, each entry being, so to speak, a short article, with many lexemes in ancient Hebrew still requiring clarification on the basis of textual and philological research. But any self-respecting academic has more projects in mind than are ever likely to be completed, and like anyone else Emerton deserves to be credited for all his

many positive achievements and not for having 'left undone those things which we ought to have done'.

IV

Enough has been said to indicate the astonishing breadth of Emerton's scholarly contributions to the field of Old Testament and related studies. Mostly using the article form rather than more extended studies he touched on a much wider variety of subjects than most of his contemporaries and yet his publications were always marked by a detailed acquaintance not only with the primary sources but also with secondary discussions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and including occasional forays earlier as well).

This is far from exhausting an appreciation of his contribution to scholarship during his tenure of the chair in Cambridge, however. Unlike Oxford, Cambridge has been peculiar in not having an established Professor of Old Testament studies in its Faculty of Divinity, so that by convention the Regius Professor of Hebrew in the Faculty of Oriental Studies has assumed responsibility for the different aspects of the subject in both Faculties. Emerton took this responsibility most seriously in both academic and administrative matters. On the latter, though never seeking a position higher up the University ladder, so to speak, he was extremely conscientious in all Faculty matters, never missing a Board meeting in either Faculty if he could help it and at one time chairing them both simultaneously. He was the opposite of the politically astute kind of academic who is able to manipulate the system to the advantage of his or her own pet interests. Rather, his almost innocent openness and sense of fairness towards colleagues in other subjects occasionally meant that others were able to take advantage of his integrity to their own advantage and to his loss. Nevertheless, he ensured the smooth running of the subject for which he was responsible, much to his close colleagues' relief.

In addition to his own research he did all he could to encourage that of others. The team of colleagues in his own areas of expertise, though inevitably changing slowly over the years as some went off to more senior positions in other universities, was of exceptional strength throughout his long tenure, so that many doctoral students from around the world were attracted to study at Cambridge. While the work of supervision was shared out, of course, Emerton had by far the largest number of research

students and the roll of his former pupils in senior positions both in this country and overseas is impressive. He was always supportive, working quickly on submitted work and encouraging the particular interests of each rather than pushing them to become effectively his research assistants. He never wanted to establish a 'school' or anything of that sort, and if, as some have claimed, his pupils tend to bear a family resemblance, that will only have been because they were often anxious to follow what they regarded as a path of excellence.

To bring all this activity together, he took over from its founders—Andrew Macintosh, Ronald Clements and Barnabas Lindars—the work of co-ordinating the fortnightly Old Testament Seminar once it moved from its original college setting to the Faculty of Oriental Studies.²⁴ The seminar not only gave colleagues and doctoral students near the end of their studies a chance to give a preliminary airing to their current work but also attracted other scholars from elsewhere, including not least many from overseas who were on sabbatical in Cambridge or who were invited to present a paper if they were visiting this country for a shorter period. This regular procession of leaders in the field from elsewhere was often the excuse for generous hospitality by John and Norma in their home.²⁵ It all contributed to the sense of 'buzz' about the subject in the University.

Emerton's international influence was exerted not least by his editorial activity,²⁶ especially in regard to the quarterly journal *Vetus Testamentum*. This journal was effectively the baby of Piet de Boer during the post-war years. It is clear from the rapid rise in circulation after its first issues in 1951 that there was a market for another international journal to set alongside the German *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, though at the same time de Boer made no secret of the fact that, owing to his own wartime experiences aiding the Dutch resistance, he was keen to establish an international forum independent of a journal whose editor during the war was seriously compromised politically. To draw scholars together during the difficult years after the war de Boer had organised an

²⁴ See R. P. Gordon (ed.), *The God of Israel* (University of Cambridge Oriental Publications 64; Cambridge, 2007), p. xi. Gordon comments on the book's dedication to John Emerton that he 'set a standard of contribution from the chair that is rightly remembered as one of its most notable features during the many years that he organized the Seminar'.

²⁵ Norma has counted 379 such visits in her own diaries (many of them repeats, of course) and she has listed for me the names of 84 scholars from all the inhabited continents except South America.

²⁶ It deserves mention here that in 1988 Emerton served on a panel of otherwise Flemish-speaking scholars to investigate Dutch theological faculties at universities and theological colleges and to report to the government. This involved nine visits to the Netherlands that year.

international Old Testament congress in Leiden in 1950, and from this successful gathering both the International Organization was established and, at the formal level, *Vetus Testamentum* as its journal, with its editorial board having ultimate oversight of the triennial Congresses. De Boer edited the journal for its first 25 years, and his archives show how assiduous he was in this role. In his report to the editorial board in 1971, however, he comments that, after taking advice from one or two close associates on the board, he had approached Emerton to see if he would be willing to be nominated at the Congress in Uppsala that year to join the board in the expectation that he would assume the task of principal editor when de Boer retired. This all went through smoothly. Emerton joined the board and became Secretary of the International Organization in 1971, and he succeeded de Boer as editor in 1976. He held the post until 1997, his twenty-one years thus falling short by only a few years of de Boer's own exceptionally long period of service.

Although Emerton had help with some of the work of assessing submitted articles, especially from America, he took full personal responsibility for all aspects of the journal's presentation with an insistence on editorial excellence that few could match. Once an article was accepted in principle he would correspond with the author in hand-written letters (he never had a secretary and later he never used email) to ensure that she or he was content with even minor copy-editing details. One American colleague once expressed to me his astonishment at receiving a letter with no fewer than 86 numbered points, inviting improvements on some matters of substance but also recommending that this comma might be replaced by a semi-colon and so on.²⁷ Emerton insisted (quite rightly) that all secondary works should be cited in the form in which they were first published and only then, if desired, in a translated form. Many (mainly) English-speaking scholars would often document only a translated version. Part of Emerton's routine for many years thus involved teaching in the Oriental Studies Faculty for most of the morning, walking to St John's College (or less frequently Trinity College) for lunch, and then calling in at the University Library on his way back to the Faculty for meetings and the like, in order to track down and document the relevant book and page number in its original language version. All this would

²⁷ When I held the position of Secretary of the Faculty Board in Oriental Studies, which in those days included the drafting of agendas and minutes, a colleague in another subject joked with me that if I was sure to make an odd mistake in punctuation Emerton would be so concerned to have that put right that he would not take any notice of what I was actually reporting so that I could effectively cook the books. It didn't work.

then be typed into the margin of the article before it was submitted to the publisher. He also personally typed out the many short book reviews that he developed as a feature of the journal (and in fact wrote many of them himself; it is difficult to count them, because at first the authors of the notes were not named). The labour involved in preparing a fascicule of 128 pages every quarter (and it was never late), together with the additional work of editing the Supplement series, therefore, scarcely bears thinking about. Some would be dismissive of the value of such chores (and I suspect that there was an element of displacement activity here), but for Emerton it mattered that the leading international journal in his field should maintain the highest standards in every respect of which he was capable. Certainly, the senior editors at the Press (E. J. Brill of Leiden) were grateful that there was nothing for them to have to do editorially and also that the circulation of *Vetus Testamentum* was noticeably higher than its peers.

In addition, for a number of years he was the editor of the (British) Society for Old Testament Study (SOTS) monograph series, from 1964 he was the Old Testament editor (with C. E. B. Cranfield as New Testament editor²⁸) for the revival of the venerable International Critical Commentary series, and he was on the less onerous editorial board of the *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*. These tasks were of a more spasmodic nature but nonetheless important each in its own way.

Sometimes there were signs that the burden was unsustainable. The length of time that submitted articles took to be evaluated could vary. For the most part they were treated in a timely manner, but if for some reason he found them challenging they could lie ignored. There were some submissions to the Supplement series which might also lie unread on his desk for up to a year, and the Congress volumes, which were published in that series, took longer and longer after the Congress itself to appear. Eventually this particular problem was solved by the Supplements being edited by another member of the board. Equally, editorship of the particular series of SOTS monographs for which Emerton was responsible came to be shared with R. E. Clements, who then succeeded him as sole editor. For all that, and however great the loss of time for his own research projects, Emerton's editorial work deserves to be celebrated. Many younger scholars benefited from the attention that he gave to their submissions and

²⁸See J. D. G. Dunn, 'Charles Ernest Burland Cranfield, 1915–2015', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XV (Oxford, 2016), pp. 187–204.

the advice he gave them, while the quality of the journal was (and remains) outstanding.

When the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England needed a new translation of the liturgical Psalter in 1970 they asked a member, the English language scholar David Frost, to start a pilot scheme. He enlisted Andrew Macintosh, a Cambridge Hebraist, and they translated twenty-five psalms, which were published in 1973. They were joined by Emerton, who now undertook a major project for the Anglican Church which brought together his detailed knowledge of the Hebrew text of the book of Psalms with the wide variety of problems associated with it and his vocation as a scholar in holy orders. In 1972 he was asked by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to chair a panel of eight Hebraists: himself, Macintosh and three other Anglicans, a Roman Catholic, a Methodist and a United Reformed Church member, with Frost as an English specialist, to translate a new liturgical Psalter. They worked with remarkable unanimity, and their new version incorporated Macintosh and Frost's earlier psalms. The work lasted six years. It was published as a separate volume, *The Psalms: a New Translation for Worship* (London, 1977), as well as in the *Alternative Service Book* (Cambridge, 1980), and again later as *The Cambridge Liturgical Psalter* (Cambridge, 2013); furthermore, some of its translations were used in the Penguin Classic *The Psalms in English* (London, 1996).

It was therefore a severe disappointment (to put it mildly) that the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England chose to use a different version in the subsequent *Common Worship*. The version they preferred had been developed in the United States on the basis of prior English versions by people with no knowledge of Hebrew. As initially recommended, it contained a number of serious errors and inaccuracies; indeed, this was one of the reasons why an earlier embodiment of the Liturgical Commission had decided against adopting it in 1971. A special meeting on the Psalter was held in July 1998 between members of the Liturgical Commission and a small group of biblical scholars. There was bitter antagonism between Emerton and his colleague Andrew Macintosh on the one side and the Commission members on the other. The Revd Dr Anthony Gelston of Durham University did his best to mediate between them, and probably as a result of this was asked (along with Professor John Rogerson of Sheffield, who chaired the meeting) to vet the text and propose necessary emendations. He has told me privately that 'I think all the absolute errors were removed (they were called the Gelston Noes!), but many of my other suggestions were not adopted ... I believe it is a

reasonably satisfactory version in its published form.’ Despite this, Emerton understandably felt aggrieved that the powers that be in the church which he had sought faithfully to serve had sacrificed what he regarded as their prime responsibility to uphold careful and thorough scholarship in favour of other considerations.

By a deliciously ironical misprint, a review of the new translation in *News of Liturgy*, March 1999, appeared under the title ‘The Psalter 1998: A Daft Text for Common Worship’. Emerton, with his colleagues Macintosh and Frost, seized on this to prepare a booklet for the relevant meeting of the Anglican General Synod: *‘A Daft Text’: The Psalter 1998. A Critique of the New Psalter* (Cambridge and Sydney, 1999). Its aim was to demonstrate that the version proposed by the Liturgical Commission should be dismissed ‘as a poor translation of scripture and as a mediocre English version’. It gives a much fuller account than I have offered here concerning the whole history of the production of the text eventually adopted²⁹ and points out many mistakes and other defects in the version as then available. (It should be noted that this was prior to the version as corrected by Gelston and Rogerson.) The booklet was endorsed by two other members of the original panel, one of whom already was and the other of whom later became a Fellow of the British Academy: the Revd Dr E. W. Nicholson³⁰ and the Revd Dr W. Horbury. Despite all this effort, General Synod followed the recommendation of the Liturgical Commission, which to an outside observer looks like a triumph of politics over scholarship. Nevertheless the version whose preparation Emerton had overseen went into six national prayer books elsewhere in the world, while in this country it remains as a version approved for use by the church.

V

Emerton’s years in Cambridge saw the growth from school to adult independence of his three children, Caroline, Mark and Lucy. It is fair to

²⁹This includes the astonishing revelation that when the version was originally presented to Synod in 1997 members were assured that it had been checked ‘by a group of Biblical scholars from Cambridge’. It turned out that these scholars were candidates for ordination at one of the theological colleges, two of whom had just completed one-year courses in elementary Hebrew. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that it was later necessary to engage two real scholars, Gelston and Rogerson, for the necessary task, though they had to do their patch-up job under considerable pressure of time.

³⁰See J. Barton, ‘Ernest Wilson Nicholson, 1938–2013’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XV (Oxford, 2016), pp. 121–38.

say that the bulk of care for home and family fell on Norma's shoulders, which makes all the more remarkable her own achievement of completing a doctorate in the history of chemistry. When published as *The Scientific Reinterpretation of Form* (Ithaca, NY, 1984), it won the highly prestigious Phi Beta Kappa Society award in Science (1985). I once asked her how she managed to find the time to do this, and she replied quite simply that 'I only darn John's socks in the vacation'.

Norma went on to collect a great deal of material for a book on scientific explanations in the pre-scientific era of the Genesis creation narratives, but time taken in caring for John sadly meant she had to abandon her plans for publication. Given that, as already noted, he had harboured an ambition since student days to write a commentary on Genesis, this means that our loss on this score is double.

Outside home (and away from his beloved cats), the principal focus of Emerton's social life lay in St John's College. Elected as a Professorial Fellow in 1970, he did not hold any major college office, but he was an active supporter of the work in the chapel, assisting there regularly until 2003. He enjoyed dining and participating in the Wine Circle after dinner (it has been said of him that 'vintage port was the object of his profound devotion'³¹), using this, as well as his home, as a base for entertaining colleagues and guests. This was only one of the scenes where his boyish sense of humour could shine; he had an unending supply of humorous stories and jokes and was also an occasional author of limericks. But equally, such relaxed surroundings were the ideal setting for the kinds of gossip which are often the best way in which to advance university and wider academic life.

During the first part of his tenure in Cambridge Emerton did not take sabbaticals, partly because one of his colleagues suffered a serious road accident which left the small department, already reduced by university cuts, very short-staffed, and Emerton was, as already noted, completely committed to ensuring that the full undergraduate syllabus should be taught. In due course, however, he discovered St George's Anglican Cathedral in East Jerusalem, with its associated hospice, and the unrivalled library collections of the Dominican École biblique just down the road. This provided a more than congenial home from home, and from there he was able not only to continue his research but also to maintain the several friendships he had with colleagues in the Hebrew University. Also associated with the cathedral is St George's College, which was no

³¹ From an obituary in the college's *The Eagle* (2016), 71.

longer able to serve its founding purpose of training for Anglican ordination throughout the Arab-speaking countries of the Middle East. It therefore reinvented itself as a base for thoughtful pilgrims who wanted to have some serious historical and archaeological input into their visits to the Holy Land, and Emerton soon became a very popular adornment to a number of such courses. The recognition of his standing and contribution by his appointment as an Honorary Canon of the Cathedral in 1984 was thus a source of particular pride, and it drew him back to Jerusalem on many subsequent visits for shorter or longer periods.³²

Honours and distinctions that came his way included a Cambridge DD (1973), an honorary doctorate from the University of Edinburgh (1977), a fellowship of the British Academy (1979) and the award of its Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies (1991) and a Corresponding Membership of the Akademie der Wissenschaften, Göttingen. A loyal member of the British Society for Old Testament Study, he was elected its President for 1979. Similarly, he was the President of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (whose Secretary he had long been previously) from 1992 to 1995. This concluded with his presiding over the Congress which met in Cambridge in August 1995, thus coinciding, more or less, with his retirement from the Regius Chair. Following his Presidential paper he was presented with a Festschrift to mark the occasion, and another followed fifteen years later after a day at St John's College that was held to mark his eightieth birthday.³³

Only rarely did he take up invitations to visiting positions abroad. Early on he was Visiting Professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern Studies at Trinity College, Toronto University (1960), and in 1982–3 he was a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In 1986 he acceded to the strong invitation from a former student to spend a term as Visiting Professor at the United Theological College in Bangalore, India. While sitting on an upstairs veranda of his residence there, the door back into the room behind him blew shut and locked.

³²He visited Israel some 39 times in all, including more or less annual visits between 1979 and 2009.

³³J. Day, R. P. Gordon and H. G. M. Williamson (eds.), *Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Studies in Honour of J. A. Emerton* (Cambridge, 1995); K. Dell, G. Davies and Y. V. Koh (eds.), *Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms: a Festschrift to Honour Professor John Emerton for his Eightieth Birthday* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 135; Leiden, 2010). The latter, incidentally, includes a fine portrait by John Edwards. These volumes include more or less complete bibliographical records of Emerton's publications with a final update in *SLLB*, pp. 1 and 5.

Unwisely, he decided the best way to extricate himself from this predicament was to drop from an upstairs balcony. Given that he was extremely short-sighted and not especially athletic (though otherwise perfectly fit), almost inevitably he fell, injuring his pelvis. The long-term effect of this accident led from one hip replacement to another. He eventually began to lose free mobility because of arthritis and was reluctant to use a wheelchair in public. Thus in his last two years he was confined to his home, where he enjoyed frequent visits from colleagues and friends. After years of macular degeneration of the eyes he lost his sight, depended on Norma to read to him and effectively gave up on his academic pursuits. He was cared for with loyal devotion by Norma and he died peacefully at home on 12 September 2015, aged eighty-seven.

His legacy was a significant body of work together with a band of pupils, colleagues and friends who were strongly influenced by his example. The number who gathered for his memorial service on 27 February 2016 in St John's College chapel, including not a few from overseas, was testimony to the high regard and, indeed, affection in which he was held.

H. G. M. WILLIAMSON
Fellow of the Academy

Note: I am especially indebted to Norma Emerton for help in compiling this memoir. Among others who have offered information and advice I note with gratitude Graham Davies, Anthony Gelston, Robert Gordon, Arie van der Kooij and Andrew Macintosh. Dutch scholars formerly or currently engaged in work on the Peshitta Project who have provided helpful guidance include Piet Dirksen, Konrad Jenner and Geert Jan Veldman.

