



AUBREY R. JOHNSON

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AUBREY RODWAY JOHNSON

1901-1985

AUBREY JOHNSON was born at Leamington Spa on 23 April 1901, the youngest of five sons in a family with strong religious loyalties. His father, Francis Johnson, and his grandfather, Benjamin Johnson, were both Baptist ministers. His mother, Beatrice Mary Johnson (née Bebb), was of Huguenot descent. Johnson's early life was overshadowed by bereavement and by various family difficulties. When he was 2 years old, his father, who had suffered from tuberculosis for many years, was compelled by ill health to retire. Generous members of his congregation provided a house for him and his family in West Malvern. Two years later he died. Faced with the responsibility of supporting herself and her sons, the eldest of whom was severely epileptic, Mrs Johnson moved to Newport in Monmouthshire to be near her sister. To provide an adequate income she ran a boarding-house.

Until Johnson was in his early twenties, his educational career gave no indication that he was to be one of the most outstanding biblical scholars of his generation. He began in an elementary school in Newport, from which he gained a scholarship to the Newport Intermediate School for boys. At the age of 15 he passed the School Certificate examination of the Central Welsh Board, but with no particular distinction. It had now become necessary for him to find a job. His eldest brother's condition had seriously deteriorated and the other three brothers were serving in the armed forces. At first he worked in his uncle's firm of corn merchants, and later, after his uncle's sudden death, in the Education Section of the Finance Department of Newport Borough offices. While there he felt drawn to teaching. From 1919 till 1922 he worked as a probationary teacher and studied for the matriculation examination. By 1922, however, his thoughts had turned to missionary work overseas, and specifically to the training of a native ministry. Various factors contributed to this: his home background, his membership in an active and lively Baptist congregation, and contact with one or two young men, including his middle brother, who were in training for the ministry. To prepare himself for what he believed would be his future work, Johnson now entered Trefecca Memorial College. This was made possible

by the generous support of Miss Ann Elizabeth Hall, a friend of his mother, who had been one of the group of members of the Leamington congregation who had provided a house for the Johnson family at West Malvern. During his student days, her home was always open to him, and each summer she welcomed him and his closest student friends to her holiday bungalow at Ponterwyd, near Aberystwyth. The opportunity to relax and study in that beautiful part of the country was an invaluable experience for Johnson at the time and remained among his most cherished memories. Later, Miss Hall provided a home for him at Cardiff, to which she welcomed his bride, Winifred Mary Rowley, in 1947. She continued to share the home with the Johnsons until her death ten years later at the age of 94. The second edition of Johnson's monograph *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (1966) is dedicated 'To the memory of Ann Elizabeth Hall a Dear Friend of the Family Through Three Generations'.

It was at Trefecca Memorial College that Johnson's serious interest in scholarship was kindled, chiefly through his delight in Greek. His academic calibre became evident. If he was a late starter, his progress was now rapid and steady. In 1924 he entered Cardiff Baptist College and the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire where T. H. Robinson was Lecturer (and from 1927 Professor) in Semitic Languages. One of Johnson's closest friends there was Gwynne Henton Davies, later to become the first Professor of Old Testament Studies at Durham and subsequently Principal of Regent's Park Baptist College, Oxford. In 1928 they both gained first-class honours in Hebrew. Johnson continued his studies in order to take honours in Classical Greek, but a sudden crisis at the family home in Newport prevented him from completing his final examinations. The following year the sudden death of his mother left him with the responsibility of caring for his eldest brother, whose condition continued to deteriorate until eventually he had to be placed in an institution.

Meanwhile the award of studentships made it possible for him to continue his studies, first at Cardiff under the direction of his revered teacher T. H. Robinson, and then at King's College London. In 1931 he graduated Ph.D. (Wales) and was awarded a Fellowship of the University of Wales, which enabled him to continue his research at University College, Oxford, and at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, where he was deeply influenced by Professor Otto Eissfeldt. Further study abroad followed in 1937, when he spent the summer in Jerusalem, learned modern

Hebrew and Arabic, and forged close links with the British School of Archaeology there.

In 1934 he had become Assistant Lecturer in Semitic Languages at Cardiff, in succession to his future father-in-law, H. H. Rowley, who had been appointed to the Chair of Semitic Languages at Bangor. When T. H. Robinson retired in 1944, Johnson (who had already been promoted to a Lectureship) succeeded him in the Chair of Semitic Languages, which he held till his retirement in 1966.

All Johnson's major publications were concerned with one or other of three subjects: the religious status and cultic role of the king in ancient Israel, the nature and functions of cultic prophets, and the Old Testament understanding of the individual and the community. The first and second of these were examined in two short studies published in 1935 and 1936: 'The Rôle of the King in the Jerusalem Cultus', which was an essay in the volume *The Labyrinth*, edited by S. H. Hooke, pp. 71-111, and 'The Prophet in Israelite Worship', which appeared in *The Expository Times*, xlvii (1935-6), 312-19, as one of a series entitled 'Some Outstanding Old Testament Problems'. This latter article was read as a paper to the Society for Old Testament Study in January 1935, when Johnson had only recently taken up his duties as Assistant Lecturer at Cardiff. T. H. Robinson called upon him at short notice to fill the gap caused by the withdrawal of one of the speakers. For a relatively young scholar to read a paper on so controversial a subject on his first appearance before the Society must have been something of an ordeal; but if Johnson did not persuade all his hearers of the validity of his views, he left them in no doubt about his ability.

The Labyrinth: Further Studies in the Relation between Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World (1935) was the sequel to another volume of essays edited by Hooke, *Myth and Ritual: Essays on the Myth and Ritual of the Hebrews in Relation to the Culture Pattern of the Ancient East* (1933), which Johnson later described as 'epoch-making'. No essay in the later volume provoked more discussion than Johnson's. His vividly presented argument concerning the vital importance of the king for the well-being of the community and his functions in the cultus had its antecedents in the researches of Sir James Frazer and, of more immediate relevance, in the work of H. Gunkel and S. Mowinckel on the Psalms. Johnson's earlier research into ideas of life after death in ancient Greece and Israel had led him to a partial acceptance of Mowinckel's hypothesis concerning the Israelite New Year Festival, in which the Kingship of Yahweh was

celebrated and the earthly king's role was held to have been of vital importance. When, however, the subject was taken up by the so-called Uppsala School, Johnson, like Mowinckel, was careful to emphasize points on which he differed from them. For Johnson the fundamental point of principle, which Eissfeldt had inculcated during his sojourn at Halle-Wittenberg, was that comparative material from Israel's environment should be used to shed light on the Old Testament only after the latter has been carefully examined in its own light. The reverse procedure could result in the attribution to Israelite thought and practice of elements which were alien to them. Johnson's general position was restated in his article 'Divine Kingship in the Old Testament' in *The Expository Times*, lxii (1950-1), 36-42, and much more fully in his Haskell Lectures, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (1955; rev. edn., 1967). The use of the term 'sacral' in the title of the latter work was intended to indicate Johnson's rejection of the extreme theories, notably those of the Uppsala School, which had come to be associated with the term 'divine kingship'. In Hooke's third symposium, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Kingship in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (1958), Johnson's contribution, 'Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship' (pp. 204-35), not only presented his position yet again, but defined with extreme clarity and courtesy his relationship to the 'Myth and Ritual School', his important disagreements with the Uppsala School, and his view, unlike that of Mowinckel, that the Psalms of Yahweh's Kingship had an eschatological orientation.

The article on the place of the prophet in Israelite worship which appeared in 1936 made it clear that Johnson had a contribution to make to the discussion initiated by G. Hölscher and continued by Mowinckel and others about the existence and functions of cultic prophets. His view that there were such prophets associated with the sanctuaries, that some of their oracles have been preserved in the Psalms, and that after the Exile the prophetic guilds attached to the Jerusalem Temple lost their identity in the Levitical choirs of the Second Temple was presented more fully in his monograph *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel* (1944; rev. edn., 1961). The culmination of his work on this theme was *The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody* (1979), in which he elaborated his view of the responsibility of the cultic prophet for society in regular worship and in times of national and individual crisis. He also advanced new suggestions, including the claim that some Psalms were composed in the pre-monarchic period and therefore that the cultic prophets were active then. Like Johnson's earlier mono-

graphs on the cultic prophet and on sacral kingship, the argument was developed in relation to passages from the Psalms in Johnson's fastidiously accurate renderings, supported by ample documentation. Thus, in the process of presenting his hypotheses he had translated a considerable part of the Psalter and presented a running exposition of it. His expertise in the entire range of Psalm study is well exemplified in his essay 'The Psalms' in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, edited by H. H. Rowley (1951). When a friend asked him whether he intended to write a full commentary on the Psalms, he replied, 'No. I have a bee in my bonnet about the Psalms, and people with bees in their bonnets should not write commentaries.'

Johnson devoted two monographs to another area of Old Testament study. In *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (1942; rev. edn., 1961) he re-examined the idea of 'corporate personality' (an expression coined by H. W. Robinson which Johnson used *faute de mieux*) and the striking oscillation between the thought of the social unit or kin group as a corporate personality (the one) and as a group of individuals (the many). The allied concept of an 'extension of the personality' was used to shed light on such terms as the spirit, word, name, angel, and sons of God, and on the relationship of the prophet to God. *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (1949; rev. edn., 1964) is a detailed examination of the Hebrew terms which shed light on the Hebrew view of man, though Johnson doubted whether there was any such comprehensive and unified view. In his approach to the subject he took account of studies in anthropology and primitive religion. His most notable predecessor in the Old Testament field was the Danish Semitist Johannes Pedersen, whose work Johnson viewed with admiration and a measure of critical reserve. As always, his work bore his individual stamp and expressed his independent conclusions. From one point of view this book could be regarded as a sequel to *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God*. In the preface, however, Johnson states that it is 'the first of a series of monographs designed to elucidate the famous saying of Habakkuk ii. 4', i.e. 'the righteous shall live by his faith(fulness)', which Johnson regarded as a unifying theme running through the Old and New Testaments and therefore 'of fundamental importance for the fashioning of a sound Biblical Theology'. Clearly he had a programme of work in prospect which he did not live to complete. In the closing section of *The Vitality of the Individual* he discussed the meaning of 'life' and 'death' in the Old Testament. He planned to write a full discussion

of the Hebrew root *ʾMN*, from which come the words for 'faith', 'faithfulness', and 'truth', words which, like 'life', link the Old Testament with the New, and not least with the Fourth Gospel, which Johnson regarded as the most Semitic book in the New Testament.

The fact that Johnson did not complete all that he had planned must be attributed mainly to the high standards which he set himself. He took time and care to write with clarity and precision; and all that he wrote was based on a thorough examination of the original sources and a wide and discerning knowledge of the relevant scholarly literature. His blend of precise scholarship and intellectual brilliance gave to his work an exceptionally stimulating quality. The subjects on which he wrote were controversial and have remained so, but Johnson was no controversialist. Almost invariably he joined issue with other scholars (and then only briefly) when they misrepresented his views. It cannot reasonably be denied that he made contributions of the greatest importance to the subjects under consideration and that his published work conforms to the highest standards of scholarly integrity.

The sustained excellence of Johnson's scholarly output might well have led to his being lured elsewhere; but he remained faithful to the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire to which he rendered outstanding service as teacher and administrator. One of the results of the Education Act of 1944 was a need for Scripture specialists in schools. To meet this need an appropriate new degree course was introduced alongside the already existing degree course in Hebrew, and Johnson's department was enlarged by the addition of three new members. He was also active in promoting the work of the Joint School of Theology. In 1964 a Collegiate Centre of Theology was opened at which joint classes were held for students of the theological colleges and also some evening courses which were open to the public. In these and other developments Johnson's sympathetic leadership counted for much. He held the offices of Dean of the Faculty of Theology in University College during his tenure of the Chair and of Dean of Divinity in the University of Wales from 1952 till 1955.

In addition to his work in his department and in University College, Johnson served as a member of the Old Testament Panel of the New English Bible. He delivered the Haskell Lectures at the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin, Ohio, and the Gunning Lectures at Edinburgh, and was a visiting lecturer at Louvain, Oslo, and Marburg. Edinburgh, Marburg, and Uppsala honoured him by the conferment of honorary doctorates. In 1956 he was

President of the Society for Old Testament Study. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1951 and awarded the Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies in 1961.

As a colleague and friend Johnson was unfailingly courteous and helpful. His dignified bearing and slightly reserved manner could not conceal the essential warmth and kindness of his nature. Above all, both in his scholarship and in his character he had an unshakeable integrity. He owed much to the constant support of his wife, who, with their two daughters, survives him, and who cared for him devotedly during the period of weakness which preceded his death on 29 September 1985.

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Note. I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs Winifred Johnson, who has generously supplied me with information concerning her late husband's early life. I am also indebted to Professor Cyril G. Williams, a former student and colleague of Professor Johnson, who provided information about the developments in the Faculty and department at Cardiff.