

REUBEN AHRONI

An Appreciation

by

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It is a very pleasant task, indeed, to write a few words of appreciation about Reuben Ahroni for this volume which is dedicated to him. I have not only read many of his scholarly publications in English and Hebrew, and have even reviewed one his books, but I have also had the pleasure and privilege of knowing this learned, modest, and gentle person as a colleague and a friend. His innate sweetness and genuine, unfeigned humility have endeared Reuben Ahroni to all who know him. I, in particular, have always felt a certain kinship with Reuben due to our shared backgrounds as Jews from Arab countries who grew up in the young State of Israel, completed our advanced studies in the United States, and have made our academic careers in this country.

Reuben Ahroni hailed from the ancient Jewish community of southern Arabia, a community whose origins go back to biblical times. He was born to a large family of eleven in the British Crown Colony of Aden. The Adeni community combined the religious traditionalism of their Yemenite brethren in the interior with a modern world outlook fostered by modern education under the British aegis. Like most Adeni Jews, Reuben's family had strong Zionist sympathies, and as a boy, he was active in a labor-oriented Zionist youth group. At the age of eleven, Reuben experienced firsthand the devastation that engulfed Adeni Jewry when from December 2 to 4, 1947, shortly after the United Nations voted to partition Palestine, anti-Jewish riots broke out that left eighty-two Jews dead, a similar number injured, and the synagogue, the two schools, and hundreds of Jewish homes and most Jewish businesses destroyed. Among those killed were Reuben's baby brother. Two years later, at the age of thirteen, Reuben along with his group emigrated to Israel and was taken straight to a kibbutz in the foothills of Jerusalem. It is there that his intellectual pursuits and love of learning intensified.

In his new home, Reuben would go through another and different kind of struggle, one which he and many others who shared his experience endured. Reuben, like his friends from Aden — and his coreligionists from throughout the Islamic Near East and North Africa — was brought up in a traditional religious home. Now, suddenly they were thrust into this secular world of the Kibbutz which had absorbed them. Those young people who refused to eat non-kosher meat ate very scantily and were hungry for a long period until slowly, reluctantly, they gave up. But then a transformation took place. By the time Reuben's family arrived in Israel two years later and were placed in a refugee camp, he realized that he had changed, and he felt a deep sense of alienation from his traditional family. He was now a young Israeli *halus*, or pioneer, imbued with the socialist idealism of the period. His uniform was khaki shorts, blue work shirt, sandals, cloth hat, and a knapsack. Reuben recalled to me once an incident from this period of his life that was both humorous and poignant at the same time. The kibbutz was short on labor, and so they invited the camp people to come work for them. Imagine young Reuben's surprise and embarrassment when he stood face to face with his community from the old country coming to work at the kibbutz in their best suits. After all, in Aden they were all merchants, townspeople who knew nothing about agriculture. Although they were initially laughed at, these Adenis and Yemenites soon proved to the established settlers that they, too, were hard workers. In fact, the exotic South Arabians with their authentic roots back to biblical times became in time the "darlings" of the romantic Ashkenazi establishment.

Eventually, Reuben left the kibbutz to pursue his studies at Tel Aviv University. It was there that he met his wife Rachel. After completing a B.A. in Hebrew language and literature, and three years of graduate work at Tel Aviv, he was asked in 1979 by the Jewish Agency to be a *šaliah*, or "emissary," to the Jewish community of Cincinnati, Ohio, where he stayed for three years. So as not to waste any study time, he managed to complete a doctorate at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in Bible, Midrash, and Semitic languages. He returned to Israel in 1973 on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, and when that was over he taught concurrently at both Haifa University in the north of the country and at Ben Gurion University in the south. Just then he received an invitation to come to Ohio State University as a visiting professor. He moved back to the States with his wife and two children, and then, as he once said, he "remained another year, and another year, and the rest you know."

Over the years, Reuben's academic interests have ranged widely. His publications have included studies in Bible, Yemenite Judeo-Arabic literature, Yemenite Hebrew literature, Modern Arabic literature, and the history of Southern Arabian Jewry. This breadth is all the more impressive today when so many (too many) Middle Eastern scholars are often unable to deal with more than one language, time period, or cultural tradition of the region. Reuben's most recent book, *The Jews of Aden: A Community That Was (Yehude Aden: kehila she-haytah*. Tel Aviv, 1991), is a work not merely of scholarship, but of filial devotion. This historical portrait of his own ancestral community has received justified acclaim from academic and journalistic reviewers. The book describes the unique and independent evolution of Adeni Jewry from the rest of Yemenite Jewry since the British conquest in 1839. As one mutual colleague wrote in a personal letter, "I must say that [the] book opened my eyes to see the uniqueness of this community and the salient aspects of its socio-political religious, socio-economic, and cultural life." The pioneering nature of this study has been underscored by reviewers. In the words of one: "What he has accomplished in this pioneer study is threefold: He has attempted to provide a chronological, theoretical description of the events that made up the history of the community as well as a critical assessment of these events. He scrutinized legal texts and other documentary material relating to the socio-political environment in which the Jews of Aden lived and managed their communal affairs. He has provided a preliminary survey of the salient dimensions of the religious, socio-economic, cultural and intellectual fabric of the community, and the contours of the reality of its life, its vitality and its diversity-offering, among other things, a glimpse into the relationship between Jews and Arabs in the Protectorate." (N. Rejwan, in *Afikim*, Feb. 1993, p. 47).

The main body of Yemenite Jewry was also the subject of an historical survey by Reuben, *Yemenite Jewry: Origins, Culture and Literature* (Bloomington, 1986), the first book of its kind in English. One reviewer called it "a truly exceptional contribution to our understanding of the distinctive texture of the Jews of Yemen. . . well-balanced, instructive, richly documented, and refreshingly creative" (L. Hakak, *Judaism*, 36:4 (1987): 499-501).

On a very different note are Reuben's translations of modern Arabic short stories into Hebrew, done many years ago in the Israeli journal *Turim*. These translations, which were made for high school teachers, are written in a felicitous Hebrew that captures the flavor and styles of the Arabic originals. Though not part of his scholarly oeuvre, these translations show his sensitivity

as an interpreter of literature and culture with a firsthand acquaintance of the Arab world. Reuben Ahroni's many contributions in Biblical Studies ranging from the Jacob and Esau story, to the Book of Job, and the Gog and Magog prophecy, are beyond my own purview, and cannot be discussed here. In concluding these words of appreciation, may I join Reuben's colleagues and friends in wishing him continued health, happiness, and productivity for many, many years to come.