

JOHNSON, AUBREY RODWAY (1901-1985), university professor and Hebrew scholar

Name: Aubrey Rodway Johnson
Date of birth: 1901
Date of death: 1985
Gender: Male
Occupation: university professor and Hebrew scholar
Area of activity: Education; Religion; Scholarship and Languages
Author: D. Hugh Matthews

Aubrey R. Johnson was born in Leamington Spa 23 April 1901, the youngest of the five sons born to the Reverend Frances Johnson and his wife Beatrice May (née Bebb). Like his grandfather, his father was a Baptist minister. His oldest brother, Frank, was a sickly child, suffering from severe epilepsy, but Benjamin, Stanley, Harry and Aubrey were all healthy children. The father, however, suffered from tuberculosis and he was forced to retire when Aubrey was only two years old. Generous members of the Leamington congregation provided the family with a home in West Malvern, but within two years the father had died and the family relocated to Newport, Monmouth, to be near Beatrice Johnson's sister. There, the widow ran a boarding house to support her young family.

Aubrey was educated in an elementary school in Newport before gaining a scholarship to the Newport Intermediate School for boys. At 15 he passed the Senior School Certificate examination of the Central Welsh Board but by this time his eldest brother's condition had deteriorated and his other brothers, all of military age, had been conscripted to serve in World War I, so that it was necessary for Aubrey to work in support of the family. His first job was with his uncle's firm of corn merchants, but following the sudden death of his uncle he found employment in the Education Section of the Finance Department of Newport Borough Council. While there, he became attracted by the teaching profession and from 1919 to 1922 he worked as a probationary teacher while he studied for the matriculation examination. By 1922 he felt a calling to missionary work and in particular to the training for a native ministry overseas. To this end, a family friend made it possible for him to enter Trefecca Memorial College, a preparatory school for ministerial students near Talgarth, Brecknockshire, run by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. Here his interest in scholarship was kindled. Having matriculated at Trefeca, he moved in 1924 to the Baptist College in Cardiff and registered as an undergraduate student at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire. He graduated in 1928 with first-class honours in Hebrew, but the sudden illness and subsequent death of his mother left him responsible for his eldest brother and led to the abandonment of a further year's study to take an honours degree in Classical Greek.

When it became possible for him to continue in the University, with the aid of a studentship award he pursued doctoral studies under the direction of **Professor Theodore H. Robinson** in Cardiff and at King's College, London. In 1931 he gained a Ph.D. (Wales) for a thesis on 'An Investigation of the Problem of Greek Influence upon the Religious Thought of Judaism in the Hellenistic Age'. He was also awarded a Fellowship of the University of Wales which made it possible for him to continue his research in the Universities of Oxford and Halle-Wittenberg, where he was influenced by Professor Otto Eissfeldt. The subject of his research was 'The Psychological Implications of Hebrew Grammar'. In 1934 he succeeded his future father-in-law, **H. H. Rowley**, as Assistant Lecturer in Semitic Studies in Cardiff, with promotion to a lectureship soon following. He spent the summer of 1937 in Jerusalem, learning Modern Hebrew and Arabic, during which time he forged close links with the British School of Archaeology there. In 1944, when **T. H. Robinson** retired, he succeeded him to the Chair of Semitic Languages in Cardiff - a post that he held until his retirement in 1966. When the Education Act of 1944 called for Scripture specialists in schools, he responded, as head of the Semitics Department in Cardiff, by arranging a new Biblical Studies degree alongside its language degree.

In 1947, he married Winifred Mary Rowley, the daughter of **Professor H. H. Rowley**, Manchester, in Fallowfield Baptist Church, Manchester. They had two children, Janet Mary and Susan Elizabeth.

Aubrey Johnson's academic brilliance did not allow him to forget that he had entered the Baptist College in 1924, and in 1941, in addition to his university duties, he accepted ordination and became pastor of the historic Baptist church of Croes-y-parc in the Vale of Glamorgan. When, eventually, his university duties precluded his service as church pastor, he continued to help small churches with free pulpit supplies. His role as Baptist minister also prompted his activity in promoting the work of the Joint School of Theology in Cardiff, involving the University and the Baptist College together with St Michael's Anglican College, Llandaff (which joined the Faculty in 1958). He was also instrumental in setting up the Collegiate Centre of Theology with its concern for Practical Theology (1963). He served a term as Dean of the Faculty of Theology in Cardiff and a further term as the Chair and Dean of Divinity in the University of Wales from 1952 till 1955.

Even as an Assistant Lecturer, Aubrey Johnson's work was being published. Pressed into service at short notice due to the withdrawal of a speaker at a meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study in January 1935, the newly appointed Assistant Lecturer came to the notice of the academic world with a paper on 'The Prophet in Israelite Worship'. The paper was subsequently published in *The Expository Times*. Later that year an essay, 'The Role of the King in the Jerusalem Cultus', appeared in *The Labyrinth: Further Studies in the Relation between Myth and Ritual in the Ancient World* (1935), a volume edited by S. H. Hooke. These papers concentrated on subjects that would become two of the three main foci of his academic work: the religious status and cultic role of the king in ancient Israel, and the nature and function of the cultic prophet in the Old Testament. Essays on the former topic included essays in *The Expository Times* (1950-51) and in another Hooke symposium, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Kingship in the Ancient Near East and Israel* (1958) together with his own Haskell Lectures published under the title *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel* (1958) with a revised edition appearing in 1967. His work on cultic prophets was expanded in *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel* (1944; revised edition 1961) and *The Cultic Prophet and Israel's Psalmody* (1979) - his expertise in the Psalms being first exhibited in an essay, 'The Psalms' published in *The Old Testament and Modern Study* (1951), edited by **H. H. Rowley**. The other focus of his work was the Old Testament understanding of the individual and the community. This topic was examined in his volumes *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (1942; revised edition 1961) and *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (1949; revised edition 1964).

The excellence of Aubrey Johnson's scholarly output resulted in offers of chairs in other prestigious Universities, including Oxford, but his loyalty to Cardiff never wavered. In spite of this, in 1979, during his retirement, he refused attempts by his old University to award him the degree of Doctor in Divinitate, honoris causa in recognition of his international distinction and his services to the University. The reason he gave was that it was the support and honours that the University had already bestowed upon him that had made possible any distinction he had obtained and any contribution he had made. He also forbade his friends and colleagues to arrange a Festschrift in his honour; but he did accept a University College of Cardiff Fellowship in 1981, and after his death his former students set up The Aubrey Johnson Memorial Fund with the purpose of aiding post-graduate students.

He served as a member of the Old Testament Panel of the *New English Bible* for many years. In 1948 he delivered the Haskell Lectures at the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin, Ohio, and the Gunning Lectures at Edinburgh in 1966. He was also a visiting lecturer at Louvain, Oslo and Marburg. Edinburgh University awarded him an honorary D.D. in 1952, and Marburg University (1963) and Uppsala University (1968) each conferred an honorary D. Theol. In 1951 he was elected Fellow of the British Academy and served as President of the Society for Old Testament Studies in 1956. He was awarded the Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies in 1961.

On his retirement, Aubrey Johnson and his family moved to Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire and it was in Gloucester Hospital that he died aged 84 on 29 September 1985.

Author

D. Hugh Matthews, (1936 - 2020)

Sources

South Wales Baptist College Records

Proceedings of the British Academy, LXXII (1986), 433-439, with a monochrome photograph

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