September 4, 2019

Professor Michael Segal

Dean, Faculty of Humanities

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

To Professor Segal and members of the committee:

I am honored to submit my candidacy for a position as faculty member in the Bible Department. I am currently completing my Ph.D. dissertation at the Hebrew University and expect to submit in December of 2019. This coming year I will be a postdoctoral fellow in the departments of Bible and Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University, and I will teach a course in the Bible Department. In addition, I am a tenured lecturer in the Bible Department at the David Yellin College of Education, a lecturer at the Kerem Institute for Humanistic Jewish Education, and a research fellow at the David Hartman Center for Intellectual Excellence at the Shalom Hartman Institute. My fields of research and instruction are the Pentateuch, biblical semantics, and ancient Israelite religion.

I received a BA, graduating with honors, from the Bible Department and the Revivim Honors Teacher-Training Program in Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University; I likewise received my MA with honors from the Hebrew University in the Department of Jewish Thought. This training provided me with proficiency in the philological-historical approach, especially in the study of the Pentateuch, a field that has always been at the heart of the Bible Department’s scholarship and for which it carries a well-earned reputation. Through my studies in Jewish Thought I gained the ability to engage in broad conceptual questions while maintaining exacting standards of textual and historical analysis.

My doctoral dissertation, entitled “Divine Anger and its Appeasement in the Pentateuch and its Sources,” challenged the validity of the commonly accepted term “divine anger,” showing that this is a later interpretive category conflating diverse phenomena in biblical literature. The first part of my dissertation offers new interpretations of a series of biblical expressions hitherto understood as signifying the emotion of anger, and shows that some of them refer not to inner states but to external action, and that others have no relation to anger at all. The second part is an analysis of Pentateuchal texts that reveals the contradictory conceptions within the Pentateuch itself regarding outbreaks of divine power, their causes, and forms of prevention.

In addition to adapting my dissertation for publication as a book, a project I intend to finish within the year, I have begun working on a topic that will be at the center of my second book: the relationship between the corporeal embodiment of the Biblical God and his personality. While in most scholarship these topics are treated separately, in light of recent studies on the Biblical conception of the self – which does not maintain a dualistic separation between body and soul – my research will explore the “self” of the Biblical God holistically. Such an exploration will involve investigating the connections between emotions and ethical attitudes attributed to God, such as faithfulness or vengefulness, and various modes of divine embodiment, such as visibility versus hiddenness; presence in fire and cloud versus revelation in human form; a fixed abode in heaven with occasional visits to earth versus a constant presence in the Temple; and so on. These lines of questioning will be pursued in parallel with the Pentateuch’s narrative timeline of the relationship between God and Israel and will be based on as precise a differentiation as possible between the Pentateuch’s textual layers. The research will thus contribute to the phenomenology and history of the ancient Israelite religion, to current discussions of the conception of self in the ancient period, and to the classic field of Pentateuchal scholarship in its current forms.

Lecturers in Bible in Israeli academia face a dual challenge: on the one hand, many Israelis feel alienated from the Bible while, on the other hand, many others react hostilely to critical study of Scripture. An additional challenge, facing teachers of the liberal arts as a whole, is the question of how to attract new students to the study of ancient texts while maintaining an uncompromising level of scholarship. My experience as a lecturer in the Bible Department at the David Yellin College of Education has taught me a way to overcome both challenges: I have learned that students are ready to eschew familiarity for the challenges of a new and unfamiliar world if they are convinced that exposure to such a world, alongside strenuous technical work, allows for deep reflection on fascinating historical, conceptual, and cultural questions. I came to this insight in the text courses that I taught – especially on the Pentateuch, but also in such courses as “Sin and Forgiveness in the Bible” and “Holiness and Politics” (in which students from the departments of Jewish Thought and History also took part), as well as “Introduction to Bible,” which I have taught for a number of years and which I continue to update and improve upon. This year I will also teach a course on the book of Deuteronomy in the Bible Department at the Hebrew University.

I will conclude by noting that I attribute special importance to carrying the torch of Pentateuchal studies – a field that has stood at the heart of Biblical scholarship since its beginning but is considered by many to be caught in an inescapable crisis or simply outdated. The renewal of this field and its establishment on firm methodological foundations – in relationship with other branches of Biblical scholarship and other fields as well as through dialogue with scholars in Israel, the United States, and Europe – are essential tasks in which I aim to take part.

In my research and my teaching I aspire first to continue the discourse in which I took part as an undergraduate and then as a young scholar with the members of the Hebrew University’s department of Bible, as well as with scholars in its departments of Jewish Thought, Philosophy and Comparative Religion. Second, I hope to contribute to the continued development of the department and the preservation of its standing as a national and world leader in Biblical scholarship. I would consider it an honor if you would take my candidacy for faculty position into consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Ariel Seri-Levi