

NEW CONTINENTS OF THE MIND

PREPARING FOR AFRO-ASIAN STUDIES AT THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY

By Walter Zander

Immediately after the Hebrew University was opened in 1925, preparations began for the establishment of an Oriental Department because it was considered essential to provide for the study of the civilisations in whose midst the Jewish National Home was to be built.

By now this School covers the whole field of Arab studies, and extends to Turkey and Persia on the one side, and Egypt on the other. With its courses on Islamic civilisation, Arab language and literature, Egyptology and the Modern Middle East, it has become an essential part of the University, has provided most of the experts on Arab affairs in the country, and is contributing greatly to the knowledge and understanding of the Arab world and the whole Middle East.

Today Israel is set in a much wider context. If thirty years ago her relationships in the East were mainly confined to her immediate neighbours, they now reach throughout Asia to the Far East and extend deeply into the African continent. The Middle East can no longer be understood in isolation, nor as a battleground for foreign spheres of influence, but must be seen as part of the Asian and African world which is engaged in a fundamental and revolutionary transformation.

Ben-Gurion's support: This process is probably the most significant movement of our times, reversing the trend of Western expansion and leadership which has dominated world affairs for as long as 400 years. For Israel the establishment of fruitful relations with the peoples of Asia and Africa—in political, economic and cultural fields—has become a matter of supreme importance.

If it was necessary, therefore, in 1925 to establish a School of Arab and Middle Eastern studies, it is certainly essential today to prepare for the establishment of Asian and African Studies at the Hebrew University. As Mr. Ben-Gurion wrote in a special message to me:

“It is of the utmost importance for Israel to accelerate its existing progress in the establishment of closer links with the Asian and African peoples. I believe that a study of Asian and African culture can contribute to this end, and I am strongly in favour of this enterprise.”

Building on sound foundations: Although the task has a political aspect the University will have to approach the matter in a spirit of scholarship. It is not sufficient to deal with the present-day problems of these continents. Where ancient civilisations are concerned—particularly in Asia—the work will have to be based on their classical languages,

literatures, religions and philosophies, because only the study of the foundations will lead to an understanding of present realities.

The development of such a School will naturally require a long time and a careful selection of subjects, and their priorities, will be necessary. As far as Asia is concerned, it is suggested to concentrate first and foremost on Indian, Chinese and Far Eastern studies, in view of their impact on human civilisation in the past and their significance for the future.

In the field of African studies it may be wise to begin with one particular district, such as the West African countries with which Israel entertains the most lively relationships; and other districts may be added later.

As for the organisational side, it does not appear to be necessary at this stage to establish a new department. It will be sufficient for the time being to develop and expand organically the existing School of Oriental Studies into these new fields until it has grown into a fully-fledged School of Asian and African Studies. The history and the experiences of the great Western Schools in these fields, particularly in Great Britain, the United States, France, Belgium and Holland, will provide guidance of great value.

Approach on three fronts: The task itself will have to be approached simultaneously on three fronts. There is firstly the problem of staff. Experience in other departments of the University has shown that it is difficult to find outside Israel academic staff of adequate standing, able to teach in Hebrew or willing to learn the language within a reasonable time.

Apart from comparatively few exceptions, it is impossible to rely on supply from outside, and it will therefore be necessary to send suitable graduates from Israel to be trained abroad, a practice which has been followed with great success in other faculties of the Hebrew University over many years.

The basic study should be undertaken in the Oriental and African institutes of the West, and wherever possible it should be followed by further study of at least a year in the countries of Asia and Africa themselves. The duration of these fellowships will vary from three to five years according to the circumstances of the case.

Much time needed: As far as Asian Studies are concerned, language, linguistics, literature and history will be the main subjects. In the field of African Studies, it may

be advisable to begin with the more modern issues of political science, economics, government and administration, to which subjects African archaeology can perhaps be added.

The second task is to build up a library in Asian and African Studies. It will require much time, expert guidance and funds to secure the necessary books and journals, many of which are rare.

Lastly, it is necessary to prepare now for the endowment of lectureships in order to make sure that those graduates who have trained as potential members of the academic staff in these fields can be appointed at the successful conclusion of their studies.

Fund-raising prospects good: As far as the financial means for the realisation of the plan are concerned, the present strain on the University and, indeed, the Government of Israel is well known, and no further expansion of the University can be undertaken unless the necessary means have been secured before. But the task is so important and significant that the prospect of finding the necessary funds must be considered good.

For Israel the development of Asian and African Studies at the Hebrew University is more than the introduction of just another subject. The centuries of the Diaspora have brought the Jewish people in contact with the civilisations of the Christian and Islamic worlds: and the Jewish mind, expressed in the Hebrew University, reflects this experience. Now with the establishment of the State, Israel is brought face to face with the world of Asia and Africa. and the whole future of Israel may depend on the understanding of this world.