A Colleague's Appreciation

*"Mr. Deuteronomy":
For Jeff Tigay*

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The Epic of Gilgamesh—arguably, the greatest text ever written about the human quest for immortality—ends at a particularly poignant moment. The hero Gilgamesh, awakened to his own mortality by the death of his companion Enkidu, journeys to the end of the world to wrest the secret of everlasting life from Uta-napishtim, the Noah-like figure who survived the great Deluge and was granted immortality by the pantheon of Sumerian gods. But Gilgamesh's quest is futile; Uta-napishtim cannot make him immortal, and the magical plant of rejuvenation that Uta-napishtim's wife gives Gilgamesh as a consolation present is almost immediately stolen from him. Gilgamesh returns home to Uruk despondent, but the last surviving tablet of the poem ends with him proudly surveying the ancient monumental walls of the city.

These last lines hearken back to the epic's opening, which more fully describes how Gilgamesh restored the ancient foundations of those walls and fortified them. In addition to being a great warrior and builder, Gilgamesh was also a conservator of the past. Moreover, as the epic's prologue recounts, Gilgamesh was also a student of ancient wisdom—a scholar, as it were, who recorded his own past, the story of his exploits, on a tablet of stone that he buried in the foundation of his renovated city wall. These opening lines of the epic suggest that Gilgamesh's quest for everlasting life may not have been so futile; indeed, perhaps, the quest may even have been achieved. The immortality that Gilgamesh has sought may not lie in deathlessness but in what he has actually accomplished and will leave behind him in this world for posterity to see, celebrate, and learn from.

Like Gilgamesh, a scholar's immortality lies in his or her work. It rests too in his or her students and in the respect won from his or her colleagues. A *Festschrift* like this one for Jeff Tigay is merely a token of that legacy, the

acknowledgement by his students and colleagues that the work is indeed worth celebrating.

Because I am neither a scholar of ancient Near Eastern literature nor a biblicist, I will leave the happy task of celebrating Jeff Tigay's accomplishments in these fields to the specialists. I know Jeff primarily as his junior colleague in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and in the Jewish Studies Program at Penn, and here, in these pages, I want to celebrate the many intellectual and pedagogical contributions he has made to what has been his scholarly home for nearly all his career. And because the scholarship has always been the key to his contributions, we must begin there.

Jeff Tigay is best known today as "Mr. Deuteronomy"—a title given him by the great late anthropologist Mary Douglas¹—but, as nonspecialists may be somewhat surprised to learn, his scholarly career began with a doctoral dissertation, later his first book, that was not on the Bible but on the evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic; in fact, the Bible hardly figures explicitly in either the dissertation or the book. The movement from Gilgamesh to Deuteronomy was not, however, fortuitous. His study of Gilgamesh was impelled, as Jeff wrote in the introduction, by "the need to gain some empirical perspective on the hypothetical critical methods which have come to dominate" biblical scholarship. The reference here is, of course, to the documentary hypothesis (in any one of its versions). As Jeff wrote, opponents of the documentary hypothesis have often charged that its conception of the literary development of the Bible based on the notion of the conflation and elaboration of originally independent and discrete traditions (the so-called documents) was entirely unrealistic because no other work of literature was ever known to have been composed in that way. What Jeff set out to show in his study of Gilgamesh was that composition of this sort *was* realistic; indeed, works of ancient Mesopotamian literature—witness Gilgamesh—were not only composed precisely in this way but could serve as actual paradigms for refining and elaborating our hypotheses about the composition of the Bible. Thus was born the idea of the "the empirical model for biblical

1. The appellation was made about ten years ago, shortly after the JPS Commentary on Deuteronomy was published, when Douglas happened to deliver a lecture at Penn and a dinner was held in her honor at the White Dog Café, a fancy campus-area restaurant that had once been the home of the theosophist and guru Madame Blavatsky. The 15 guests at the dinner were seated at a long dinner table, Douglas at one end, Tigay (by chance) at the other. In the middle of the meal, Douglas suddenly clapped her hands and silenced everyone, and then addressed Jeff across the distance, "Professor Tigay, you are Mr. Deuteronomy. Please tell us something about the book!" Which he did.

criticism,” the phrase that served as the title for Jeff’s second book, the seminal collection of studies (including three lengthy chapters of his own) showing how an approach of this sort could radically enhance our understanding of the Bible’s literary history.

In formulating the empirical model, Jeff was following earlier scholars who had widely delved into the Bible’s ancient Near Eastern background, particularly his own teachers Moshe Greenberg and William W. Hallo. Jeff’s singular contribution was his nuts-and-bolts approach to the connection, his insistence on elaborating documentable instances of composition that could then be applied to biblical cases. That approach, empirical itself, the *empiricism* of the empirical model, combined with a sophisticated methodological framing of the approach, has defined not only Jeff’s scholarship but, equally so, his pedagogy.

In a time when study of the Bible and ancient Jewish literature has become increasingly theory driven, dominated by ideology rather than the literature itself, Penn’s graduate (and, for that matter, undergraduate) programs in Bible and ancient Jewish literature, under Jeff’s leadership, have remained determinedly empirical—that is, text focused, historically oriented (though not in a naively positivist fashion), and comparativist, with a strong emphasis on controlling the primary sources in their original languages. The point has always been to understand the literature within its context, or more accurately, many contexts—linguistic, historical, literary, cultural, religious—and to use that understanding and its tools to develop models that will lead to demonstrable hypotheses about the biblical text. By maintaining these standards, and eschewing fashion and fanciness, Jeff himself has been an empirical model of the rigorous, demanding, and fair mentor. His scholarship and pedagogical leadership have made our programs in Bible and ancient Jewish literature virtually unique in the field, respected and celebrated for their intellectual integrity and uncompromising commitment to the primary sources.

The other side of Jeff’s scholarship and pedagogy is exemplified by his magisterial commentary on Deuteronomy. I once asked Jeff—after he had completed the Deuteronomy commentary and as he was beginning his current work-in-progress, a commentary on Exodus—what it was that he liked so much about writing a commentary. His response was revealing: a commentary, he said, “forced you to deal with everything in the text.” Not just the parts that interested or excited you, not just the sections to which you already had answers, or that you thought would lead to another article, or were relevant to the current scholarly fads, but *everything*. Because only by dealing with everything could you fully understand the text. And only by doing so, and with luck, will a scholar be fortunate to stumble across something truly new and make a genuine contribu-

tion to knowledge. A commentary, he said, forced him to deal with the stuff he would rather avoid. But precisely those parts, he added, sometimes ended up being the most productive and original.

The 33 excurses at the end of the Deuteronomy commentary, the profuse footnotes on each folio page of the volume (typically occupying four-fifths of the page), and the 69 pages of end-notes all exemplify that commitment and dedication to covering “everything.” So do the preparation drills he requires of his students for his graduate seminars, which force them to cover every conceivable dimension of the biblical text from ancient linguistic cognates through medieval parshanut and the modern scholarship, and the famous (or infamous) *bekiʔut* tests that all doctoral students must complete in addition to their coursework and comprehensive exams. The students who successfully complete Jeff’s doctoral program may not know everything—who does?—but they know, minimally, what “everything” means.

To date, the crowning achievement of Jeff’s scholarly career has been his commentary on Deuteronomy, and it seems to me no accident that it was precisely this book of the Bible that found its match in Jeff. Deuteronomy is the most focused book in the Bible, both in terms of its overall structure and its determined monotheism with its centralization of the cult and the worship of God. As Jeff points out in the introduction to his commentary, it is also the most “intellectual” book in the Pentateuch and, with its repeated injunction to its readers to learn the Teaching and teach it to their children, the most self-consciously and proudly pedagogical.

In concluding this short tribute, I want to point to an additional pedagogical contribution Jeff has made that is probably less known than others to most readers of this volume. One day about 10 years ago, when Jeff was serving as director of the Jewish Studies Program at Penn, and I was his assistant, he approached me with the following query: the evening before, Jeff and his wife Helene—who is currently head of the Auerbach Center for Jewish Education in Philadelphia (and certainly a major inspiration for his pedagogical interests)—were out to dinner with friends, and one of them had asked him if there was interest in establishing an undergraduate program in Jewish education at Penn. Did I think, he asked me, that there was interest? Without thinking a moment, I immediately answered in the negative—I could not conceive of a Penn undergraduate, most of whom I saw headed straight for Wall St. or medical or law school, being interested in Jewish education as a career.

But never have I been so wrong. Within weeks of that conversation, three of our strongest majors in Jewish Studies suddenly approached me about the possibility of combining Jewish Studies with education. I immediately told

Jeff, and he jumped at the opening. He contacted the Graduate School of Education, and selflessly spent hours devising an interschool minor in Jewish education. When Jeff stepped down as director and I followed him in the position, we continued the initiative he began, which now, some 10 years later, has produced a masters program that is about to be launched. Somewhat bewilderingly, the idea of a program in Jewish education was not greeted by all our colleagues in Jewish Studies with as much enthusiasm as we felt. But this did not deter Jeff. His leadership was literally visionary—he saw both the practical and intellectual credibility of the program and that it neither compromised nor impinged upon the academic responsibilities and commitments of Jewish Studies. This program in Jewish education—so very much in the Deuteronomistic vein—will, I believe, be one of Jeff’s lasting legacies.

I conclude this tribute with Jeff’s own voice. One of my favorites among his writings is a short essay that appears in the *Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary*. The essay treats the formula, “*Ḥazak Ḥazak V’Nithazzek*,” that is repeated in synagogues by the congregation whenever each book of the Torah is completed and derives, as Jeff writes, from a scribal formula. Here is Jeff’s translation:

Ḥazak—More power to you! *Ḥazak*—Congratulations to you! *V’Nithazzek*—May you and the entire congregation of Israel persist, study, read, and continue to draw strength from the Torah.