



H. J. POLOTSKY (1905-1991)

Author(s): SIMON HOPKINS

Source: *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Vol. 34 (1990), pp. 115-125

Published by: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41299926>

Accessed: 21-01-2020 13:30 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*

H. J. POLOTSKY (1905–1991)

SIMON HOPKINS

When Professor Hans Jakob Polotsky died in Jerusalem on 10th August 1991 the world of Egyptology, Semitic scholarship and general linguistics lost one of the greatest philologists these subjects have ever known, a scholar of massive learning, penetration and originality, who towered, Colossus-like, over the rest of his generation. In the range and depth of his scholarship Polotsky was quite without rival; the copiousness of his erudition was way beyond the reach of lesser mortals and every subject that he touched turned to gold.

Polotsky's parents came from the Crimea but had fled Russia in order to seek a better life in western Europe. After his father had studied chemistry in Zürich, where Polotsky was born in 1905, the family returned to the Crimea for a brief spell until moving westwards again in 1907, this time to Karlsruhe. In 1911 the family settled in Berlin, where Polotsky's school life was spent, first at the *Gemeindeschule*, then the *Real-* and subsequently at the classical *Gymnasium*. It was during this youthful period in Berlin that the seeds of Polotsky's later career were sown. His childhood was bilingual: his parents addressed him in Russian while he, as a rule, would reply in German. At school he at first enjoyed only Latin, to a certain extent history, but had a strong dislike for mathematics and the sciences. During his later school years at the classical *Gymnasium* he took very much to Greek. French too was taught, and when faced with a choice in the curriculum between English and (Biblical) Hebrew, since English was already known to him, Polotsky chose Hebrew. At the time of his *Bar Mitzvah* his parents engaged a Hebrew teacher from Palestine, from whom he not only learnt the Ashkenazi cursive script but also acquired a grounding in Modern Hebrew. At the same time, at the age of 13, Polotsky began the study of Egyptian, inspired (as he liked to tell) by the gift of an illustrated book on Roman history in which there

appeared a picture of Cleopatra dressed as Isis, accompanied by the caption of her name written in hieroglyphics. The following day Polotsky went to the Egyptian Museum and found A. Erman's *Die Hieroglyphen* in the Sammlung Göschen series. The subject immediately enchanted him. This was the start of his Egyptological career and he never looked back. In addition to Egyptian he also began to extend his reading in Hebrew, especially in post-Biblical varieties, and to study Arabic and Syriac. Outside school hours he read voluminously in the Jewish communal library. On leaving school Polotsky was absolved from oral examination and in lieu called upon to deliver a lecture on an Egyptological subject. His school-leaving certificate recorded his declared intention of becoming an Egyptologist.

Polotsky entered the University of Berlin, specializing in Egyptology and Semitic languages. His proficiency was such that he skipped the early stages of instruction and directly joined more advanced classes, coming under the powerful and lasting influence, always gratefully recalled, of K. Sethe (1869–1934). But it was to Göttingen that he had long been attracted, and accordingly, despite the presence of Sethe in Berlin, he moved a year later to the University of Göttingen, where he found a congenial academic home, especially under M. Lidzbarski (1868–1928) and A. Rahlfs (1865–1935). With Lidzbarski, a scholar of exceptionally extensive accomplishments ranging from ancient epigraphy to modern dialects, he studied Semitic languages and from 1926–1930 worked as research assistant under Rahlfs collating manuscripts for the Göttingen Septuaginta-Unternehmen, a period during which he acquired a very considerable proficiency in late Greek, classical palaeography and patristic literature. *Oriens christianus* was always a field close to his heart. His doctorate, *Zu den Inschriften der 11. Dynastie*, was submitted to the University of Göttingen in 1929.

The early 1930's saw Polotsky back in Berlin, now working intensively on Manichaeism in general and its early Coptic sources in particular. The Berlin theologian C. W. Schmidt (1868–1938) had recently discovered the Coptic translation of Mani's *Kephalaia* as well as other Coptic texts of Manichaean content and Polotsky was invited to collaborate with him in the decipherment and publication of the material. These finds turned out to be particularly important, for not only did they contain previously unknown Manichaean writings, but also the newly discovered Coptic translations were able to shed much necessary light on the

obscurities of the famous Manichaean texts from Turfan, written mostly in varieties of Iranian and Old Turkish (Uigur), languages which he had read with F.C. Andreas (1846–1930) and W. Bang (1869–1934). Polotsky was in his element: he was able both to indulge the interest which he retained to the end of his life in the history of religious ideas, and at the same time to give full scope to his philological prowess, working closely on the Coptic, Iranian and Old Turkish texts themselves and interpreting them in the light of information available in other transmissions, particularly Syriac, Arabic and Greek. This period of Polotsky's researches resulted, inter alia, in the first examples of a series of masterly book reviews (a genre in which he especially excelled), several volumes of Coptic texts, a number of articles on Manichaean sources and a summary of the whole field in the entry "Manichäismus" in Pauly-Wissowa's *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Suppl. VI (1935) cols. 240–271.

The rise of Nazism put an end to the European period of Polotsky's career. Encouraged by H. Lewy (1901–1945) and G. Scholem (1897–1982), both of whom Polotsky had known in Berlin and who were now at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he decided upon a new life in mandatory Palestine. He accordingly left Berlin and moved to Jerusalem, where he was to remain until the end of his life. On 24th October 1934, in his speech at the opening of the new academic year, the Chancellor of the Hebrew University, J.L. Magnes, announced that "the addition of Dr. Polotzky as Egyptologist will make the School of Oriental Studies increasingly a centre for the study of the cultures and civilizations of the Near East". And thus Polotsky began a new career as "Instructor in Egyptology". Instruction in Semitic and other languages was soon added to his Egyptological teaching, first classical Syriac and Arabic syntax, followed later by Ge'ez, Amharic, Tigrinya, Neo-Aramaic, Turkish etc. His classes in Turkish gave him especial pleasure. Although Hebrew now became the language of his university teaching and daily intercourse, he never made it a subject for his own original investigation, nor did he use it as a medium for scholarly writing; the whole of Polotsky's published work contains barely half a dozen pages of Hebrew. He was, however, profoundly interested in Hebrew philology – he had a particular admiration for S.D. Luzzatto (1800–1865) and, of more recent scholars, H. Yalon (1886–1970) – and was a long-standing member of the Academy of the Hebrew

Language. "Real Hebrew research", he admitted, was a true "challenge to the linguist", but this challenge he was content to leave to others. In 1951 Polotsky was appointed Professor of Egyptian and Semitic Linguistics. It is merely statement of the truth to say that the traditional excellence of Israeli scholarship in these fields is directly attributable to Polotsky's teaching and example. Teaching was always dear to him; in his retirement he came to miss the contact with students and so continued on a private basis to conduct classes at his home.

In Palestine Polotsky abandoned the Manichaean subjects which had occupied him in Berlin and his interests took a new turn. Despite the difficult conditions then prevailing he found Jerusalem of the 1930's "a good place in which to live and work", especially in the opportunities it afforded for the study of modern, living Semitic languages. Jerusalem then, as now, was a polyglot city and, after a transitional period of work on Coptic art and magic, he began to take full advantage of the alluring new opportunities now available and to give free rein to his linguistic genius. Through the good offices of his landlady he found an Ethiopian monk willing to teach him, or, rather, give him practice in Ge'ez. This led, at the monk's recommendation, to Amharic and, in turn, to Gurage, taught through the medium of Amharic by a native speaker of Chaha. In 1938 he began to study Tigrinya in the same fashion, simultaneously embarking upon the investigation of the various living Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialects. Of the extensive materials which he collected and analysed in these fields only a very small part has been published. He also visited Ma'lula in Syria at this time in order to investigate the Western Aramaic dialect still spoken there. This contact with living Ethiopian and Neo-Aramaic languages relatively early in his career developed into a lifelong interest of abiding fascination and significance in his work. Polotsky realized the value of the connection between the ancient written records and the modern spoken dialects, and part of the secret of his greatness is that he was able, as no other has done, to combine and exploit the two. Whether deciphering an antique Coptic papyrus or deciding upon the phonemes of unwritten Gurage his touch was equally, and uncannily, sure. In Polotsky the philologist and linguist were one.

The Semitic languages of Ethiopia provided a field which, in his own words, was "inexhaustible and exceptionally fascinating" and a brief survey of his most important published contributions

from 1937–1987 to this “champ si fécond pour tous les aspects de la linguistique” will perhaps be appropriate here. With his entry into this field Polotsky was continuing a fine tradition of scholarship and himself exemplified his own statement that “the Semitic languages of Ethiopia have been fortunate in the men whom they attracted”.

The first Ethiopian language which Polotsky acquired was Ge‘ez. He would willingly have studied classical Ethiopic in greater depth had there been more old reliable texts available. Much, however, of what has been transmitted in Ge‘ez he found, by virtue of its nature and date, rather discouraging. The extant materials aroused in him a certain uneasiness as to their authenticity, the bulk having been composed after Ge‘ez had ceased to be a spoken tongue. His main interest in this language was as the representative of an older stage of Ethiopian Semitic. He was, on the other hand, immediately captivated by the “charme piquant” of Amharic and remained so until the end of his life. It was the syntax of this language which particularly fascinated him. His acquisition of Amharic was made the easier, as he himself has stated, by previous acquaintance with Turkish, a language which shares with Amharic a number of typologically similar syntactic features, both in general principles of word order and in matters of deeper import, such as the use of gerunds (especially that of “to say”, Amharic *bəlo* = Turkish *diye*) and the concrete and abstract functions of the “complexe relatif”. Polotsky’s first publication in the Ethiopian sphere was his review, published in the *Bulletin d’études orientales* of the Institut français de Damas 6 (1936) 118–123, of M. Cohen’s *Traité de langue amharique*. In this review, followed in later years by others of like importance, Polotsky added new observations to the grammar of Amharic, all, according to his invariable practice, illustrated by concrete examples with chapter and verse provided for each. He also drew attention here to several features in an area of syntax which was to occupy him intensively in the years to come, viz. the relative clause in general and the cleft sentence in particular. The cleft sentence (Cohen’s “phrase coupée”) is a particularly conspicuous feature of Amharic sentence structure and in accordance with his view that “le problème central de toute syntaxe est la phrase relative” it was but natural that Polotsky should devote to it so much of his attention. Study of the cleft sentence phenomenon in Amharic not only fascinated him of itself

but also helped him to put into sharper relief similar features in Coptic. Typological similarities between genetically unrelated languages were always a source of great interest to him. In *CRGLECS* 3 (1937) 2/3 he formally pointed out in a note on “Deux verbes auxiliaires méconnus du copte” the parallel in function between the Coptic second tenses as “formes relatives” and the cleft sentence structures of Amharic, announcing an article on the subject to be published on a later occasion. This article became a book, the now celebrated *Études de syntaxe copte* (Cairo 1944). In this work, which has become a classic of Egyptological and linguistic literature, it is not only the Egyptologist who will find much to delight and instruct him; there is new material here also for the grammarian of English, French, Arabic and Ethiopian languages. A mere glance at the notes to these *Études* will reveal the formidable extent of Polotsky’s reading and scope of his interests. Time and again he returned to the Ethiopian cleft sentence with further examples and deeper analysis, e.g. for Amharic in the second part of his “Amharic minutiae”, *Ethiopian Studies dedicated to Wolf Leslau* (Wiesbaden 1983) 302–306 and for Tigrinya in “Notes on the cleft sentence in Tigriña” contributed to *Mélanges linguistiques offerts à Maxime Rodinson* (Paris 1985) 287–295.

His Gurage studies bore early fruit. Having worked for a while with his informant in Jerusalem, a speaker of a Western Gurage, Chaha dialect, he was soon in a position to publish his “Études de grammaire gouragué” *BSL* 39 (1938) 137–175. In this brilliant tour-de-force Polotsky introduced into Ethiopian linguistics a new sophistication whereby freshly observed synchronic data were meticulously recorded and put into their correct historical framework. Where once there had been seen but chaos Polotsky was able to show, by accuracy of notation (even though he himself believed he had a poor ear for spoken languages) and rigour of method, that there was in fact order and system. After reading these studies it all seems so simple, self-evident and so obviously correct that one wonders why these solutions had not been hit upon before. But the the impression of simplicity is, of course, deceptive – it is only the hand of the master that makes it seem so. Polotsky had a genius for formulating elegant and immediately convincing solutions to very complex problems, disguising by felicity of expression the sheer amount of work and thought necessary to the result. It was a

pattern which was to repeat itself many times in the years to come. In his “Études de grammaire gouragué” he discovered the factors conditioning the “échanges des liquides” *n, r, l*, revealed the hidden degemination of the middle radical in the negative perfect, discussed the phenomenon of labialization, the formation of the future verb and laid bare sundry additional features of Gurage phonology and morphology. Another aspect of labialization was treated in “*L labialisé en gouragué mouher*” *CRGLECS* 3 (1939) 66–68. The culmination of Polotsky’s Gurage studies, at least in print, was his *Notes on Gurage Grammar* (Jerusalem 1951), a detailed review of W. Leslau’s *Ethiopic Documents: Gurage*. These *Notes* are contained in a booklet modest in scope, extending to just 58 pp., but in importance out of all proportion to its size. In this publication Polotsky introduced some required phonemic order into the partly impressionistic notation of Leslau’s texts and settled many formerly doubtful points of Gurage phonology, morphology and syntax.

Polotsky’s serious concern with Tigrinya began in 1938, in which year he began to take down texts dictated by an Aksum informant in the employ of the Palestinian constabulary. The study of this language was for long hampered by the lack of technical linguistic literature and suitable reading matter, such that relatively little progress had been made since Praetorius’s *Grammatik der Tigrīnasprache* of 1871. From the early 1940’s these handicaps began to be removed: Polotsky’s pupil E. Ullendorff entered the service of the British Military Administration in Eritrea, whence he was able to supply examples of printed Tigrinya literature, particularly in the form of the *Eritrean Weekly News*, and with the end of the Second World War there became available W. Leslau’s excellent *Documents tigrigna (Éthiopien septentrional), Grammaire et textes* (Paris 1941), a very great advance on anything that had been published previously. The result of Polotsky’s intensified study of Tigrinya was an elaborate review in *JAOS* 67 (1947) 143–149 of Leslau’s *Documents*, a review replete with novel observations and masterly analysis. Among the grammatical points analysed here is the Tigrinya cleft sentence, a subject to which he had already referred in *Études de syntaxe copte* and was to return to some 40 years later in greater detail in his aforementioned contribution to the *Mélanges Rodinson*. Polotsky cherished a particular fondness for Tigrinya and read widely in the language. One of his last publications was a review in *JSS* 32 (1987) 237–243 of E.

Ullendorff, *A Tigrinya (Təgrəñña) Chrestomathy*, a book in the genesis of which Polotsky himself had played an important part.

Amharic too was among his favourite subjects. The reading of Amharic texts, the analysis of grammatical phenomena and the recording of Belegstellen occupied him from the mid 1930's until his last days. There cannot be many features of Amharic grammar, especially Amharic syntax, which Polotsky was unable to illustrate in detail from his marvellous collections of examples. Relatively little of his unique experience and deep penetration into the complexities of Amharic, however, was ever committed to the printer. In this area, as in others, he preferred the short article for a particular occasion to syntheses of more ambitious intent. Here one should mention the fully laden review of E. Ullendorff's *An Amharic Chrestomathy* in *JSS* 11 (1966) 241–249, his wonderfully neat derivation of Amharic *-äw* from **-äm* in “Le suffixe de la 3^e personne pluriel en néo-éthiopien”, *Mélanges Marcel Cohen* (The Hague – Paris 1970) 286–289 and the “Amharic minutiae”, *Ethiopian Studies dedicated to Wolf Leslau* (Wiesbaden 1983) 296–306, wherein he treated with consummate skill two points of Amharic style and syntax. Polotsky greatly relished the challenge presented by languages of the SOV type and for this reason frequently turned to reading Amharic and modern Turkish literature (the quality of the latter he particularly esteemed), delighting in the syntactical intricacies which both languages so richly display. The typological similarities between Amharic and Turkish syntax, especially in the matter of the relative complex, were the subject of “Syntaxe amharique et syntaxe turque”, *Atti del convegno internazionale di studi etiopici (Roma 2–4 aprile 1959)* (Rome 1960) 117–121. Polotsky's articles are so rich in their documentation that pearls are frequently found embedded in unexpected places; witness, for example, the three beautifully compact lines explaining the inflectional logic of the Amharic compound perfect given en passant in his *Egyptian Tenses* (Jerusalem 1965) 21.

It has been mentioned that Polotsky was, on the whole, less interested in Ge'ez than in Amharic and the other modern Ethiopian tongues. Not only were its grammatical mechanisms less intriguing to him, but he also had reservations about the reliability of most of the received sources as representative of an authentic linguistic system. He was, however, very much concerned with Ge'ez as a parent of the modern Ethiopian languages and as such

a repository of information vital for historical and comparative investigation. Whether Ge'ez as we know it is or is not to be regarded as the direct ancestor of the modern languages was seen by Polotsky as “la principale difficulté de la grammaire comparée de l'éthiopien”. When W. Leslau published *Gafat Documents, Records of a South-Ethiopic Language* based upon the Bodleian MS Bruce Or. 94, Polotsky devoted most of his consummate review in *JAOS* 69 (1949) 36–41 to historical and comparative problems, dealing in particular with the important question of gemination in the Ethiopic verb. The Ethiopic *yəqattəl* and its wider Semitic ramifications were further discussed in his “Semitics”, *The World History of the Jewish People I, At the Dawn of Civilization*, ed. E. A. Speiser (London 1964) 109–111, 358, where the reader will find a beautifully concise and lucid exposition of the relationship of Ethiopic *yəqattəl* to Akkadian *iparras* and its implications. Polotsky also dealt with the grammar of Ge'ez in *JSS* 6 (1961) 251–256, another of his luminous reviews, this time of R. Schneider, *L'expression des compléments de verbe et de nom et la place de l'adjectif épithète en guèze*. In that review the possibility is referred to of Aramaic/Syriac syntax in the Ethiopic Bible. Aramaic loanwords in Ethiopic are the subject of Polotsky's essay “Aramaic, Syriac and Ge'ez”, *JSS* 9 (1964) 1–10, wherein he discusses the Jewish vs. Christian origin of the Aramaic “verba peregrina” (Dillmann) in the Ethiopic lexicon, showing that “none of these words is distinctively Christian in meaning” and that part of the confusion in the literature on this matter rests on mere verbal misunderstanding of some of the nomenclature used in New Testament textual criticism.

* * *

H.J. Polotsky wrote on a wide variety of subjects, but measured by number of words his published writings are not voluminous. He felt no particular impetus to “see his name in print” and his scholarly temperament led him to prefer the concise treatment of an individual problem to diffuse coverage of general issues. Much of what he wrote remained unpublished, often in a constant state of revision and supplementation. He never ceased to criticize and improve his own published or unpublished work, if necessary retracting whatever on later reflection seemed to him to be incorrect or improperly expressed. His Nachlass is luxuriantly

stocked with uniquely valuable materials in all the many fields he covered; for example, several volumes of texts in Jewish Neo-Aramaic, particularly in the dialect of Zakho, a grammar of the same language together with full lists of vocabulary, abundant collections of Belegstellen in Modern Syriac (especially Christian Urmi), Turkish, Amharic, Tigrinya, Coptic etc., unpublished texts and detailed book reviews of all kinds. The extent of his reading in and around these sources was quite astonishing and no phenomenon passed him by unnoticed or unrecorded. Moreover, his bibliographical and biographical knowledge of these subjects was without parallel; nobody was more familiar with the prosopography of orientalist Wissenschaftsgeschichte than he was. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of Polotsky's genius was the sheer scope and amplitude of his learning. His erudition was by no means concentrated only in those areas of Egyptology, Semitic and general linguistics which were his professional concern. He was a man versed in the literatures, manners and customs of many different peoples and ages; Bossuet, Goethe, Hazlitt or Lord Macaulay fell with the range of his expertise no less than the Egyptian verb or the cleft sentence in Gurage. He was deeply interested, too, in the plastic arts and possessed of great aesthetic sensibility. His handwriting in many scripts was characteristically beautiful. The cultural side of philological enquiry, the awareness of belonging to and of continuing a great tradition, were just as important to Polotsky as were the technical aspects of his scholarship. All this was combined with the extraordinary amiability of his nature. Of this copious store he would always give freely to any genuinely interested enquirer; one never left his company other than instructed, inspired and uplifted.

Polotsky was the heir to a splendid period of German philological scholarship of whose highest ideals and achievements he was the very embodiment. In seeking to give a real estimate of the prodigious range of his attainments the parallel which naturally comes to mind is with Th. Nöldeke (1863–1930), the figure whom Polotsky himself revered as The Master. Like Nöldeke, Polotsky was a polymath of staggering accomplishment, at home in whatever branch of oriental scholarship he found himself, and in every field to which he contributed his influence has been correspondingly decisive: Polotsky's article on Manichaeism in Pauly–Wissowa (1935) is still widely quoted; he has founded a school of Egyptian linguistics; his studies in Coptic syntax,

crowned by the two recent volumes of his *Grundlagen des koptischen Satzbaus* (Decatur, Georgia 1987, 1991), dominate the field; into Ethiopian linguistics he introduced a profundity which had not previously been attained and the recent revival in the investigation of Neo–Aramaic dialects has been attributed to his superb “Studies in Modern Syriac”, *JSS* 6 (1961) 1–32. In all of these domains, and in others, he reigned supreme. The majority of Polotsky’s articles published before the mid–1960’s were assembled in *Collected Papers* (Jerusalem 1971) and a fairly complete bibliography of his works can be found in *‘Iyyunim b-‘iqḥot miḥ’alo šel Polotsky*, published by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities (Jerusalem 1988) 61–66. Every one of Polotsky’s writings has been fashioned by the consummate, yet unobtrusive, touch of The Master into a model of learned and cultured expression in which scientific data, scholarly argument and felicitous exposition combine in a uniquely elegant synthesis. In words which he himself used of a masterpiece by his Berlin teacher K. Sethe, the Polotsky oeuvre may truly be described as “a marvel of industry, learning, and analytical power”. The death of H.J. Polotsky marks the end of an era in oriental scholarship. We shall not see his like again.