Exile in Redemption: S.Y. Agnon’s *Only Yesterday*

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Arnold Band was born in Boston, Massachusetts and was educated at Harvard University, with study years abroad in both Jerusalem and Paris. He has taught at UCLA since 1959, but has been a visiting lecturer at Yale University, the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and Brandeis University. While living in Los Angeles on the Pacific Rim, he has travelled much to Europe, Israel, Mexico, and East Asia. He is best known for his pioneering research on Agnon and other Jewish authors. A collection of his leading essays was recently published as *Studies in Modern Jewish Literature*.

In this paper, he discusses a novel by S.Y. Agnon, the leading Hebrew writer of the twentieth century, who won the Nobel Prize in 1966. In many of his novels, but specifically in *Only Yesterday*, Agnon deals with the aspirations for redemption from exile generated by the Zionist movement. In this novel, Band suggests, Agnon insists that the secular redemption from exile embodied in the re-creation of the ancestral home of the Jews as a modern national state does not solve the religious problem of exile, which, following both Biblical and Kabbalistic notions, treats exile as a metaphysical condition remedied only by some sort of messianic event. *Only Yesterday*, set in Jerusalem and Jaffa in the first decade of the twentieth century, explores this theme through the tragic experiences of the hero. The Biblical echoes add to the historical depth of the plot. The novel, written between 1936 and 1945, against the bloody background of the times, is a sober reflection on the failings of secular, nationalistic aspirations.

In the Western literary tradition, exile as an event and a recurring theme has its foundational origins in the books of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). The historical experience of Ancient Israel left a record of two major historical exiles, that of 722 BCE and that of 586 BCE. These, in turn, shaped both contemporary historiography and prophecy, on the one hand, and major mythic structures, on the other hand. The cardinal paradigms of sin and punishment through exile that we encounter in the first eleven chapters of Genesis reflect this experience. Adam and Eve expelled from Eden, Cain driven from his home, and the builders of the Tower of Babel dispersed over the face
of the earth are examples that have educated many peoples for centuries. It was not inevitable that exile would be regarded as punishment for sin rather than the result of drought or, conversely, that sin would be punished by exile rather than by pestilence, but the joining of exile and sin was what the Hebrew prophets and historians deduced from their experience – and bequeathed to us.

Furthermore, the exile-sin nexus, well established by the seventh century BCE, was accompanied by a concomitant promise or hope for redemption as a reward for repentance, for the mending of one’s ways. Again, this was not inevitable. One can conceive of a variety of different reactions to an exilic situation: a type of quietism, or a rejection of this world, or a violent militancy. But the pre-exilic prophets and the Deuteronomic historians formulated a theology of redemption that includes concepts of repentance and messianism. Redemption implied two types of return: return to the ways of the Lord and return to the ancestral homeland. This powerful cluster of ideas which generations have taken for granted was well formed even before the exile of 586 BCE, and has come down in a rich variety of possibilities throughout history. While this cluster of concepts has been the heritage of all the western monotheistic religions, Judaism, because of its historical circumstances, has emphasized the exile component to a degree unknown in other religions. Reconstructed during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE (see the book of Ezekiel), Judaism entered the Hellenistic period with its dispersion of populations, called ‘the Diaspora’, that found meaning – if not pleasure – in exile.

This notion of exile informed all of Jewish writing until the modern period and, even in the twentieth century, continued as a powerful theme in the works of many writers, specifically those with training in traditional texts. Among these, the leading figure is the Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon (1887-1970) who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967. Agnon’s life spanned the great events in the Jewish world during the twentieth century. Born in 1887 in Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he settled in Palestine in 1908 and, apart from a sojourn in Germany between 1912 and 1924, lived in Jerusalem until his death in 1970. He was thus a witness to major events such as: the acculturation of European Jewry, the Zionist-inspired return of Jews to their ancestral homeland, and the violent destruction of the European Jewish Diaspora in World War II. Well read in both traditional Jewish and modern European