Jack M. Sasson was installed in September as the Divinity School’s first Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Judaic and Biblical Studies. He also holds an appointment as professor of classics in the College of Arts and Science. His wife, Diane, is a senior lecturer in the Women’s Studies interdisciplinary program in the College.

"Neither [Judaism or Christianity] is spiritually superior to the other; neither is lacking in virtues, and neither has a surplus of vices. Above all, neither needs to lecture the other; neither needs to evangelize to the other, and neither needs to predicate its fulfillment on the destruction of the other."

Practically speaking, therefore, Judaism and Christianity were twin daughters of one mother, that mother being the ancient Near Eastern motherland, which, after its birth at Sinai, had been groomed by the prophets and then shaped into an identity in exile and, despite her many disappointments in her adult life, still hoped for a messianic consummation. After the Roman destruction of the temple, however, Mother Israel lived through the experiences of her daughters, Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and, a little later, Islam. On them, she bestowed upon the Jewish and the Christian, and then the Muslim, a messianic legacy so that, despite the centuries in which one was mistreated by the others, the three sisters never lost sight of their ancestry. Judaism retained an attachment to the original language it inherited and consequently kept to a distinctive interpretation of Scripture. But the sisters dug deeply and repeatedly into their mother’s scriptural coffers as when for Christianity during the Reformation and for Judaism during the Enlightenment they molded new visions from Hebrew Scriptures.

This shift in metaphors from mother-daughter to siblings may seem trivial, if not frivolous, but as far as Judaism and Christianity are concerned, if you recall the European artistic depictions in which the church was personified as young and vital, the temple as an old and dour, you will recognize how they had separated the idea of the faiths from their reality, how it interprets its faith or how it organizes its communities. Neither is spiritually superior to the other; neither is lacking in virtues, and neither has a surplus of vices. Above all, neither needs to lecture the other; neither needs to evangelize to the other, and neither needs to predicate its fulfillment on the destruction of the other.

Gazing on Mother Israel

I was young when I got to Brandeis; yet, I was the last of my mother’s family to go to Brandeis. I was one of her daughters although I did flit with the youngest of the siblings, Islam. Increasingly, I fixed my gaze squarely on Mother Israel.
became fascinated by how she grew up and matured, then focused on her experi- ences, surrounded by far greater powers in Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia. When she turned to the study of ancient Israel, she was delighted to discover about ancient Israel. We have little independent testimony about their neighbors, and institu-
tions would prove of uncommon signifi-
cia of the world’s oldest cultures, and their experi-
ence of Israel’s accomplishments. So, you be shocked if I reveal to you that I have been focused on one city-
state, Mari, whose archives allowed the reconstruction of a complex society from the third millennium B.C.E. long before Mo- hal had formed their identity. The kings of Mari depended on a professional diplomatic corps, its merchants traded deeply into the Aegean islands, its generals deployed advanced military weaponry, and its physi-
cians understood the nature of disease and of the world. But the prophecies of time, that lives need not be perfect to be meaningful. “At this Divinity School, it is taken for granted that divine messages need not sound uniform to be authentic, that ideals need not be absolute to be profound, that lives need not be perfect to be meaningful.” —Jack M. Sasson, the Mary Jane Werthan Professor of Judaism and Biblical Studies

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tone, and I applaud all efforts now to
enlarge its tent and to multiply the voices around it. The demographics and the
viber’s commitment to participate or withdraw, to join or
democracy, and in their wish to
be homogeneous to be admirable, and that
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I have tried to give you an explanation why, as we are about to enter a new century as well as a new millennium, Vanderbilt Divinity
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those who delighted in the life of the mind, for those who had endured the narrowing of the historical horizons; they were bursting on us like field mushrooms on a rainy fall day. Suddenly we were invited to find other ways to penetrate the world of the Hebrews. Suddenly a broader group of participants: gender specialists, and whatever it produces thrives. Though I may not be as wondrous as that tree; but I invite you all to any of the sessions I am teaching on the book of Genesis, or at least to inspect the website I have prepared on that course, http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~jek.m.souven/index.html. In recent years, Genesis has come to be a premiere test for humanistic research, not least because, for over two millennia, enlightened men and women, scholars across many fields, were becoming increasingly mindful that the writing of history cannot be shielded from subjective designs. What had happened in Hitler’s Germany and in Soviet Russia were paradigms examples; but please recall the sharp conflicts on whether or not our own involvement in Vietnam was driven by accommodating, even deceitful reconstructions of the past. Increasingly, then, history was no longer Sergeant Friday’s “just the facts, Ma’am,” but it was viewed as a narrative with many goals, some far from noble. Think of the great movie Rainman and how a single event is recalled self-serving by each of those participating in it.

The doubts about history had immediate and profound effects on biblical scholarship. Lacking independent confirmation of events as told in the Bible, scholars by droves gave up reconstructing what really happened in ancient Israel, and this abandonment, in turn, compromised all assessments that depended on historical reconstructions, such as the evolution of theology in ancient Israel.

Moreover, those who continued to write history began to incorporate and get credence to uncom- promising evaluations of the same evidence. So, today, within the pages of the same journal, you might read one scholar who is authenticating the biblical version of the Exodus from Egypt and another, equally respected scholar, dismissing it as the imagi- native invention of an old Hebrew priest.

Amazingly enough, rather than driving us to despair, this narrowing of the historical perspectives invited us to find new ways to penetrate the world of the Hebrews. Suddenly we were all entering Chairman Mao’s garden to watch a thousand flowers bloom. There was now a willingness to put aside old methods, to work interdisciplinarily, and to adopt multiple strategies for solving a problem. Questions were framed differently, and no answer was deemed taboo. So much so, that if biblical scholars from Chancellor Har- ney Branscomb’s days would return to their old classrooms, they might think they took the wrong turn down the hall.

To give you a better insight into what I mean, I invite you all to any of the sessions I am now teaching on the book of Genesis, or at least to inspect the website I have prepared on that course, http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~jek.m.souven/index.html. In recent years, Genesis has come to be a premiere test for humanistic research, not least because, for over two millennia, enlightened men and women, scholars across many fields, were becoming increasingly mindful that the writing of history cannot be shielded from subjective designs. What had happened in Hitler’s Germany and in Soviet Russia were paradigms examples; but please recall the sharp conflicts on whether or not our own involvement in Vietnam was driven by accommodating, even deceitful reconstructions of the past. Increasingly, then, history was no longer Sergeant Friday’s “just the facts, Ma’am,” but it was viewed as a narrative with many goals, some far from noble. Think of the great movie Rainman and how a single event is recalled self-serving by each of those participating in it.

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So, despite the tons of brain power already expended on the study of the Ancient Near East, the Bible, and Judaism, many important questions remain open. But these cannot be engaged where dogma tri- umphs and, above all, they must not be dis- cussed where passion is cold. I cannot imagine a livelier place to debate them than right here, at Vanderbilt Divinity School, where people of many backgrounds, com- mitments, interests, and preparations have come, with open minds, to reason together on many matters, some new and some old.

So now you know why I came to Vander- bilt and what I am hoping to find, as a teacher and as a learner. I consider it an honor, therefore, that behind the door of the office which I have inherited from Gene Telfelle, I found a page from the Jewish Pub- lication Society’s translation of the Hebrew Bible. On perusing, I learned that the page was posted by Lou Silberman soon after he moved into this same office; some forty years ago. The page has on it a beautiful rendering of the First Psalm in which the poet apostrophizes those who delight in the life of the mind, for they are:

Like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives.

I may not be as wondrous as that tree, but after a year at Vanderbilt, I already feel well planted by those streams of refreshing and, I dare to hope, never-withholding waters.

When Mary Jane Werthan, BA’29, MA’35, the first woman elected to serve on the Vander- bilt University Board of Trust, was invited to campus on November 16, 1965, to address the Vanderbilt Student Senate, Mary Jane Werthan advised the body which I have inherited from Gene Telfelle, I found a page from the Jewish Pub- lification Society’s translation of the Hebrew Bible. On perusing, I learned that the page was posted by Lou Silberman soon after he moved into this same office; some forty years ago. The page has on it a beautiful rendering of the First Psalm in which the poet apostrophizes those who delight in the life of the mind, for they are:

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