

OBITUARY

Mark Lidzbarski

By the death of Mark Lidzbarski Semitic scholarship has lost one of its most eminent representatives. Born in 1868, he was educated at Göttingen ; and he was holding the post of Professor of Oriental Philology at that university when he passed away, 13th November of last year. Little is recorded of his early life : *Wer ist's*, the German equivalent of our *Who's Who*, is scanty in the extreme. But there was recently published an anonymous book, subsequently known to be his own story of his early struggles as a Polish Jew. *Auf rauhem Wege : Jugenderinnerungen eines deutschen Professors* (Giessen), is a strikingly human document, and reveals to us the hard-working youth striving against endless difficulties, and winning his way through all.

To the world he was the man whose *Handbuch der Nord-semitischen Epigraphik* (Weimar, 1898) brought order into the mass of miscellaneous inscriptions and the ever-growing bibliography. It filled a gap in Semitic scholarship, and the critical study of Semitic epigraphy dates from that admirable work, which consisted of a handbook (of over 500 pages) and a volume of plates. The publication placed Lidzbarski in the first rank of Semitic experts ; and from that date onwards he continued to pour out invaluable contributions to Semitic epigraphy, mainly in his *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik*. Here he summarized, with critical remarks, new inscriptions and articles, writing also some veritable monographs (e.g. on the Elephantine papyri) and a number of important essays (e.g. the alphabet, Semitic abbreviated and pet names, Baal-Shamaim, etc.). He surveyed both North and South Semitic epigraphy, and Greek and Latin inscriptions of Syria and Palestine ; and the series with its complete indexes has been indispensable. Vols. i and ii covered the years 1900-2, 1903-7, and the last heft of vol. iii appeared at the close of

1915. Whether Lidzbarski had prepared any further volumes I do not know. A series of *Altsemitische Texte* with brief notes, was also projected, but of this only the first section appeared (in 1907) on Canaanite Inscriptions (i.e. Moabite, Old Hebrew, Phoenician, and Punic).

Apart from a catalogue of the Neo-Syriac MSS. in Berlin (1896) and a Neo-Syriac version of the much-travelled story of Ahikar (1894–5), Lidzbarski's other great achievements have been in Mandaitic. Here he published much needed editions of the *Book of John* (text, 1905; translation and commentary, 1915) and of the *Ginza Rabba* (1925). It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of these for the study of that ancient South Babylonian sect known as the Mandaeans (or very inappropriately as St. John's Christians). A new interest is being taken in the origin, or rather the origins, of their remarkable religion; and it is keenly debated whether it may not go back to the age of the rise of Christianity, if indeed it does not illuminate part at least of the environment in which Christianity grew up. The attitude of the Mandaean religion to John the Baptist and Jesus, its knowledge of the Old Testament, and the archaic flavour that distinguishes both the religious literature and the Aramaic dialect in which it is written, have given rise to conflicting though confident opinions. Lidzbarski, for his part, has no hesitation in ascribing the ultimate origin of the Mandaean religion to some heterodox Jewish sect which practised rites of baptism on the Jordan. For an opposing view it may suffice to refer to Dr. F. C. Burkitt in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. xxix, pp. 225 sqq., who points out that the original Mandaeans may have used the Syriac translation of the Old Testament, and that it is an Anti-Nicene Christianity which is attacked.

Accordingly the question whether the Mandaean literature is a key to the mysteries of early Christian development receives very different answers, and in this Notice of the death of Mark Lidzbarski I am concerned merely to remark

that Lidzbarski's field of study gave him an authority few could claim. Quite apart from the *literary* evidence for the rise of Christianity, and its sects and heresies, a considerable amount of miscellaneous evidence of direct and indirect value is afforded by the archaeology and epigraphy of Syria and Palestine. These throw an unexpected light upon the background or environment of Judaism and Christianity; and such is the variety of religious belief and cult from Edessa to Petra that our literary sources give us a quite inadequate conception of the ebb and flow of religion and theology at a period which was essentially that of the revival of the old Oriental world.

Lidzbarski had a first-hand knowledge of the contemporary material—and of the epigraphical rather than the archaeological—and while I am not concerned to ask whether his views were erroneous or exaggerated, there is no doubt that he has made permanent contributions in his epigraphical and Mandaitic work, and has opened our eyes to the wealth of material which the epigraphy and archaeology of Syria and Palestine can supply to our knowledge of a period of the first interest to Jews and Christians alike.

It remains to say that unfortunately I can speak little from my personal knowledge of Lidzbarski. My own modest little *Glossary of Aramaic Inscriptions* appeared in the same year as his great *Handbuch*; and when I met him for the first and only time, in one of his visits to England, shortly after, I was impressed by his overflowing good-nature and energy. We corresponded spasmodically on friendly terms, and he was always ready to answer queries and lend his invaluable aid in deciphering and explaining new and difficult inscriptions. It is much to be hoped that there will be found a successor or successors who will carry on the epigraphical labours which placed us in his debt. I close this note with the Palmyrene salutation:

לברוך שמה לעלמא

S. A. C.