



The Late Michael Avi-Yonah In Memory of my Father

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The Late Michael Avi-Yonah

In Memory of my Father

Michael Avi-Yonah came to be known by that name quite by accident. He was born in Lemberg (Lvov) in Galicia on September 26, 1904, and was named Julius (Jonah Jehiel) Buchstab. His father, Dr. Solomon Buchstab, a lawyer, was among the first Zionists in Galicia, and when he immigrated to Eretz-Israel in 1919, together with his wife Tilla, a teacher, and his only son, and later settled in Jerusalem in 1921, he chose for himself the unusual name Avi-Yonah — “Father of Jonah”. When the younger Avi-Yonah, then 17 years old, sought to register for studies at the Hebrew Gymnasium in Jerusalem, he naturally sought to avoid the awkward “Yonah Avi-Yonah” imposed on him, and used his second Hebrew given name, Yehiel. But a scribal error led to his being registered as Michael, a name which appealed to him and remained with him for the remainder of his life.

The combination of a broad general education and Zionism, which later came to characterize Avi-Yonah, found expression already at the Gymnasium; the young student sought to pass the matriculation examination in Hebrew despite the fact that he had been in the country only a short time and he was hardly fluent in the language. As his essay topic, he chose to analyse a book which had just appeared in Europe and was the current rage — Oswald Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. The results of this combination were so successful that his literature teacher, A. A. Kabak, suggested to Avi-Yonah that the essay eventually be included in his “Collected Essays”.

Upon matriculation, Avi-Yonah decided to go to England to continue his studies. His mother worked as a secretary in order to finance his stay there, while his father was serving as the first Treasurer of Kevutzat Schiller, near Rehovot. He studied Classical Archaeology and History at London University from 1925 to 1928, obtaining his

BA with honours. Many years later, when he was already a well-known scholar, the same institution granted him his MA (1943), and then his PhD (1958).

From 1928 to 1931, Avi-Yonah studied at the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, participating in the excavations at Tell Sharuhin and at the Ophel in Jerusalem. After his return to Palestine, he had come to realize that he would not be able to obtain a teaching position at the then still small Hebrew University. Much to his good fortune, as he would have put it, archaeology was a more practical profession than history, and he found a job with the Mandatory Department of Antiquities. In 1931 he was appointed Assistant Librarian, and later he directed the Department’s scientific archives, until 1948. In the latter task, he introduced an efficient system of registration of ancient sites and structures. In the same period he also served as the editor of *The Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine (QDAP)*. The then Civil Service regulations would not allow him further advancement, as those were stormy days for the Jewish community in Palestine. During these years Avi-Yonah gained his deep knowledge of the history of this country and its settlements, its archaeology and its art. His activity as an excavator in those years encompassed Hosifa (1931), Nahariya (1941) and Beth Yerah (1945–46). He also turned out an extensive series of papers, beginning with an analysis of the oriental motifs on three lead coffins from Palestine (published in 1930, in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*).

The crowning achievement of his writings in this period was his Hebrew volume *In the Days of Rome and Byzantium*, prepared during the height of the disturbances which led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Avi-Yonah noted that 1948 was the “annus mirabilis” of his life, for he was

finally appointed Scientific Secretary of the Israel Department of Antiquities and, above all, he had been privileged to see the establishment of Israel's statehood. *In the Days of Rome and Byzantium* (1946), which describes how the Jews managed to retain their identity even without a state during the first half-millennium of their exile, was a well-suited accompaniment to that stormy period, and indeed it would be impossible to understand Avi-Yonah's archaeological and historical studies without the background of his deep Zionist feelings.

In 1953, Avi-Yonah was appointed Senior Lecturer in Archaeology and Art at the Hebrew University. From 1949 on, all through the 1950s and early 1960s, he published his basic studies: *The Historical Geography of Eretz-Israel* (1949 — for which he was awarded his PhD); *The Madaba Mosaic Map* (1954); *Qadmoniot Arzenu (The Antiquities of Israel)*; with S. Yeivin and M. Stekelis, 1955); *Oriental Art in Roman Palestine* (1961), and numerous papers. Avi-Yonah was a fertile scholar in many fields, archaeological, historical, and art-historical. His bibliography includes over four hundred entries in these fields.

He directed further excavations, at Giv'at Ram in Jerusalem (1949, 1968), Caesarea (1956, 1962) and Masada (1955). In 1955 he received the Bialik Prize. His activities in the later 1960s and early 1970s were concentrated mainly in two realms — teaching and writing for the broad, non-academic public.

Avi-Yonah, according to all who studied under him, was a fine teacher. He had a vivid, flowing style of lecturing, full of humour, and he never used notes. When found in error, he would make light of it — it was only to see whether his students were still awake, he would say. And when he showed slides, he would announce in a loud voice that, finally, after so many fully-draped gods and goddesses, the turn of the nude goddesses had come, “and everybody can wake up now”. Actually, it was quite hard to doze off during his lectures. His knowledge beyond his own specialized fields, for which he was well known, enabled him to spice his lectures with innumerable anecdotes.

In art history, Avi-Yonah was a true classicist

— above all appreciating the serenity and pure balance of classical art at its finest, whether manifest in an Attic vase of the 5th century BCE, in a Velasquez canvas or in Mozart's *Don Juan*, his favourite opera. Students who heard his “Introduction to Classical Art” — for many years a required lecture within the framework of “General Studies” at the Hebrew University — will never forget the experience.

It was Avi-Yonah who introduced many students, now teaching Archaeology and Art History at the various universities of Israel, into the profession — as the list of contributors to the present volume can testify. He was known for his concern for his charges, and for his willingness to devote much time to them, from seminars at his home to supervision of doctoral theses. His work as editor of the *Israel Exploration Journal* for over twenty years enabled him to give support to younger scholars by publishing their initial researches. But he also set high professional standards; he would never raise a student's “90” to a “95” in test results, but he was usually ready to raise a “40” to a passing “50” — believing that he might be creating a future successful archaeologist by doing so. Above all, he was strict with himself, and was the first to admit his mistakes: one question in the last MA examination he prepared was — “What were the errors of Prof. Avi-Yonah in the Holyland Hotel model of Jerusalem in the light of recent excavations?”!

The Holyland Hotel model was only one of Avi-Yonah's efforts to bring archaeology and the love of Eretz-Israel to a broader public. He was involved in many public tasks, being a member of the Government Names Committee, the Planning Committee for Jerusalem, and the Board of the Israel Museum — tasks which took up much of his time and strength, but which he considered an essential contribution to the building of the country. For over thirty years he was on the Executive Board of the Israel Exploration Society, and assisted in organising the annual conventions, at which he was much in demand as a lecturer and guide — both in Israel and on the several cruises in the Mediterranean. A long series of books for the public at large flowed from his pen: *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (with Y. Aharoni, 1968; pre-

viously published in Hebrew in 1966); *A History of Classical Art* (1969, in Hebrew); several guide-books to Eretz-Israel; *Views of the Biblical World* (1958–61, both English and Hebrew editions); *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of the Classical World* (with I. Shatzman, 1975); numerous entries in the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica* (Hebrew), *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Hebrew), *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (English), *The History of the Jewish People* series, and *Introduction to Archaeology* series (both the latter in Hebrew and English editions).

Avi-Yonah was a great popularizer, in the good sense of the term — a person who, from a deep, broad familiarity with his material, could descend from the ivory tower of academe and explain things to everyone in plain language, getting his educational, cultural and Zionist message across.

In 1972, Avi-Yonah began to suffer from the heart condition which was eventually to bring about his demise. He continued all his activities almost to the end. In his last year he completed a broad historical study of the Hellenistic period, as well as the key entry “Palaestina” for Pauly’s new edition of the *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*; furthered another generation of students; taught at the University; edited the *Israel Exploration Journal*; and continued as far as possible his other public and educational activities.

Michael Avi-Yonah died at the zenith of his intellectual powers, on March 26, 1974, half a year short of his 70th birthday. He was a fine teacher, an outstanding scholar and a great man. May his memory be blessed.

Reuven Avi-Yonah