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HUNTSVILLE 1910-1911: TOUCHED  
BY GREATNESS

Chris Hauer

Jacob Z. Lauterbach (1873-1942) was among the greatest Judaica scholars of his generation. He served as Professor of Talmud at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio, from 1911 until 1942. He was granted retirement at his own request in 1934, but continued his teaching, research and publication, living his last six years among his students in the college dormitory. His published bibliography of books and articles runs 8½ pages, plus an additional 9 pages listing contributions to encyclopedias, principally the monumental *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901-1905) (Lauterbach 1951:3-20). His magisterial three-volume Hebrew/English critical edition of the Halakic Midrash, *Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael* (Lauterbach 1949) is probably his most notable monument.<sup>1</sup> But his posthumous *Rabbinic Essays* (Lauterbach 1951) occupies a special place in my affections. It was invaluable to me in my graduate school courses and in my dissertation research and over the forty years since, it has seldom been far out of reach from my desk.

I came early to an appreciation of Lauterbach because my great teacher at Vanderbilt, Rabbi Lou H. Silberman, has been his student, his secretary and finally, his literary executor. But I had never connected him with Huntsville, Alabama. That is, not until after our return to Huntsville, when I received a letter from Professor Silberman in which he said, "Oh, lest I forget. Do you know that my teacher, Jacob Lauterbach, was once rabbi of the Huntsville congregation?" (Silberman 1998). Indeed so! The historical essay in the 1994 Temple B'nai Sholom Rededication booklet records:

Rabbi Jacob Z. Lauterbach served the Congregation from 1910-1911. While here he wrote several scholarly books. He later served for many years as a professor at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Rabbi Lauterbach proudly showed his students a gold pocket watch presented to him by members of Temple B'nai Sholom upon his departure from Huntsville (Marks and Kirshtein 1994: 15).

The pocket watch was an intriguing point, so I asked Professor Silberman if he remembered it. He responded, "I remember it very well. It had a black fob with

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash is the Hebrew word for Biblical commentary. Halakic midrash, which seeks to explicate and clarify authoritative laws and customs of the Biblical Torah can only be made on the books of the Torah itself, principally Exodus through Deuteronomy. (Mekilta covers selected passages in Exodus, from chapter 12:1 through 35:3.) Hagadic midrash is inspirational, and may be made on any part of Scripture.

intricate gold initials.” (Silberman 1999). It bears noting that Rabbi Lauterbach came to Huntsville as an established scholar. His extensive contributions to *The Jewish Encyclopedia* were already behind him, and he was called to his professorial chair in the year he left B’nai Sholom. There is a lacunae in his bibliography of books and articles after 1903, presumably reflecting his concentration on the encyclopedia project. His publications resumed in 1911 and continued down to his death. He left one of his important essays, “Jesus in the Talmud” (Lauterbach 1951:473-570) in a first draft, but with a number of notes on revisions, which Prof. Silberman used in bringing the work to press (Silberman 1951:xii).

The minutes of the Board of Congregation B’nai Sholom record that the Board voted in a called meeting on 10 July 1910 to elect Dr. Jacob Z. Lauterbach as Rabbi for one year, beginning 1 September 1910 and ending 31 August 1911, at an annual salary of \$1,000. The months of July and August were designated as vacation (Bnai Sholom Board Minutes 1910:100).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of comparison, the Session Records of the First Presbyterian Church for 13 April 1913 reported an annual pastor’s salary of \$1,500. The Vestry Minutes of the Episcopal Church of the Nativity for 17 January 1907 record a call to a potential rector at a salary of \$1,500, and a payment of \$1,530 for rectorial services (15 April, 1909). However, a call to a new rector dated 21 April 1909 included a salary of \$2,000. Both the Presbyterian minister and the Episcopal rector also received the free use of a house.

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Silberman, Lou H. "A Note on the Editing of the Essays," Lauterbach 1951: xi-xii.

\_\_\_\_\_ 1998 Personal correspondence.

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