

## **Beatrice Laura Goff 1903-** by S. Cohen

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*Breaking Ground: Women in Old World Archaeology*

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Beatrice Goff was a woman with a variety of talents and interests in multiple disciplines. She was a biblical scholar with a keen interest in philosophy. She was a student of religion and symbolism in the ancient world, who examined the cultures of the past through the symbols they used to express their beliefs. She was a semiotician who examined the signs and images of ancient cultures with a goal towards explaining them in the present. And ultimately, she was a woman who expanded her knowledge and her interests to meet each new developments in her life in order to continue her studies on the cultures of the ancient Near East.

Beatrice Goff was born on December 14, 1903 in Andover, Massachusetts to Frederick Berry and Laura Goff. Little is known of her life prior to the beginning of her academic career or about her early decision to enter the field of biblical studies and religion. Goff graduated from the Abbot Academy in Massachusetts in 1922, and entered Wellesley College the following autumn, where she majored in religious and biblical studies. Following her graduation, she worked as an assistant in the Department of Biblical History at Wellesley from 1926-1927. She then re-enrolled for graduate work toward the M.A. at Wellesley, where although she did not write a thesis she received her degree in 1928.<sup>1</sup>

With M.A. degree in hand, Goff enrolled as a doctoral candidate at Boston University. However, although her doctorate would be granted by Boston, it appears that a large portion of Goff's study and research was undertaken at Radcliffe, where she enrolled in classes from 1927-28

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and 1932-33. In her first period of enrollment at Radcliffe, Goff's interest was primarily in the realm of biblical studies, and she worked primarily with Professor Ropes. In 1931, she took a leave of absence to spend a semester doing research in Palestine.

Following her return from Palestine, in her second period of study at Radcliffe, Goff's focus seems to have turned towards an interest in philosophy. She enrolled in a variety of philosophy courses focusing on subjects such as logic, history of philosophy, philosophy and science, and ethics. Goff may have also pursued some independent work in the study of philosophy with Professor Ralph Barton Perry, although she ultimately did not continue in that discipline. Goff also began her teaching career during this time. In 1932 she was an instructor in the Department of Religion at Randolph Macon Women's College in Virginia. Her doctoral thesis, entitled "The J-Document in the Hexateuch" was completed in 1933, and she received her Ph.D. from Boston University that year.

Following the receipt of her doctorate, and apparently unable to obtain an immediate academic posting, Goff returned to Harvard-Radcliffe to engage in post-doctoral work. Again working under the direction of Professor Ropes, her research focused upon the study of the early books of the Bible, building upon some of the ideas begun in her doctoral thesis. Her article "The Last Jahwistic Account of the Conquest of Canaan"<sup>2</sup> was written during this time. There is no more evidence of her earlier interest and work in philosophy, and it appears that Goff at this time was concentrating purely upon biblical studies. Concurrently, she was engaged in some volunteer work at the Harvard libraries, where she worked on cataloguing all of Professor Ropes' books.

Still without acquiring a permanent teaching position, Goff then moved to New Haven in

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the spring of 1936 to work in the Department of Religion at Yale University with Professor Erwin Goodenough as his research assistant. Her work at Yale was apparently quite successful and had a significant and last effect on her future endeavors. In fact, Goff later explicitly acknowledged the influence that Professor Goodenough had had upon her work in all her later projects.<sup>3</sup> In return, Goodenough was also extremely impressed by Goff and the work she did for him. In a letter to Radcliffe's administration, he wrote that were he to receive additional funding for his projects, he would hire her again immediately.<sup>4</sup>

However, despite her employment at Yale, it appears that Dr. Goff was still unable to find a permanent teaching position in the field of biblical studies. This discouragement then seems to have led her to consider expanding her interests and to gain further experience in other fields. In the academic year of 1938-39, she registered for five courses at Columbia University in Library Science, with the apparent goal of moving into the field of general education.<sup>5</sup> This interest in education is also evident in one of her articles published during this time, titled "Books Suitable for Use in Undergraduate Courses in the Old Testament."<sup>6</sup>

Following this period in which she appears to have been at loose ends, Goff finally achieved a teaching position in religious studies. She was hired as an acting adjunct professor of religion at Randolph Macon Women's College in Virginia, where she had taught briefly as an instructor while working on her doctorate. This first year-long appointment was followed by another academic position, this time as an assistant professor in the Department of Religion at Mount Holyoke.

Unfortunately, Goff's position at Mount Holyoke was ultimately unsuccessful, and she

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eventually broke the terms of her contract there and resigned her position. In a later interview with the appointment bureau at Radcliffe, where she was again looking for employment, Goff indicated that she did not feel comfortable at Mount Holyoke and that she found the atmosphere in its Department of Religion unfriendly and one in which it was difficult to work.<sup>7</sup> The level of Goff's unhappiness at Mount Holyoke is seconded by a letter from her minister, written as a recommendation for Goff to the Radcliffe appointment bureau. In the letter he stated that she had had appendicitis before beginning her contract at the school and had been unwell for the beginning of her term there. He stated further that Dr. Goff had stated that the department had "been in turmoil" for years, and the impression is that she found it unsympathetic to her state of health, which added to her unhappiness with the department as a whole. The minister's statement also mentioned Goff's feelings that there were few opportunities for women in the field of biblical research.<sup>8</sup>

The early termination of her appointment at Mount Holyoke marks the return of Goff's earlier interest in education, coupled with a desire to look for work also involving young people. While interviewing with Radcliffe's appointment bureau, following her departure from Mount Holyoke, in which she was looking for work in administration, Goff indicated that she had been offered a position at one of the local branches of the YWCA.<sup>9</sup> Following this set of interviews, Goff did leave academia and the field of religious studies. In 1943 she became the executive director of the YWCA in Malden, Massachusetts. Shortly after her initial appointment, she moved to Indiana and worked as the executive director of the Bloomington YWCA. In 1946, she was appointed the director of the Springfield, Indiana branch of the YWCA.

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Two years later, however, Goff suddenly returned to academia. She resigned her position at the Springfield YWCA in February, 1948 in order to return to the Department of Religion at Yale to work again as Professor Goodenough's research assistant.<sup>10</sup>

During this time, Goff also worked closely with Professors J. Hartt, Wayne Meeks, and Wm. Kelly Simpson, among others, all of whom significantly influenced much of her later work. Goff remained at Yale for the next twenty years, assisting the research of Goodenough and others, while independently conducting her own research.

This period marks the beginning of Goff's interest and research in the significance of symbols and symbolism of the ancient Near East, and departure from the mainstream field of biblical scholarship. While her earlier articles all focused upon text critical aspects of biblical studies, her later work is characterized by her forays into the semiotics of the other cultures of the ancient Near East, notably Egypt and Mesopotamia. Here again, Goff's research was heavily influenced by Goodenough's studies of Jewish symbolism, and she applied much of what she learned with him to her work. In addition to Goodenough's influence upon her changing focus of study, Goff utilized her association with other faculty members at Yale to broaden her knowledge of the ancient Near East and to expand her competence in those areas. She studied Sumerian and Akkadian with Dr. Ferris J. Stephens; established contacts with Professor Richard Parker at Brown University in order to learn Egyptian hieroglyphs, and utilized other professors from the Institute of Human Relations at Yale in order to understand some of the psychological issues associated with the study of semiotics.<sup>11</sup>

In January and February of 1958, Goff traveled to Iraq in order to gain more material for

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her study of Mesopotamian symbolism. While being hosted by the Department of Antiquities, she was able to visit the Joint Expedition of the University of Chicago and the American Schools of Oriental Research at Nippur, directed by Richard C. Haines and Vaughn E. Crawford.

Following her stay at Nippur, Goff visited the German excavations at Warka, directed by Heinrich J. Lenzen and also traveled to the Diyala region to collect further information.<sup>12</sup> The material collected from this trip enabled Goff to finish her first book, *The Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia*, which was completed in 1960 and published in 1963.

Having completed one study concerning the symbols of Mesopotamia, Goff then turned her attention to Egypt, which she had visited briefly in 1956. She returned to Egypt for three months in the winter of 1965-66, staying at Chicago House in Luxor, in order to collect further data for her next study. Her second book, *Symbols of Ancient Egypt in the Late Period* was completed a few years later and published in 1979.

Some time before the publication of the second book, Goff transferred her residence to the Boston area, although she appears to have retained her association with the Department of Religious Studies at Yale. Her next project was to have been the study of Iron Age Palestinian art, but she never completed this work. In 1981, Goff married a Mr. Dowell, a widower who had been married previously to a close friend of Goff's.<sup>13</sup> Shortly thereafter, in an alumna questionnaire from Wellesley College, Goff wrote that eye problems had forced her to give up research,<sup>14</sup> thus ending four decades of multidisciplinary work on symbolism and the significance of symbols in the ancient Near East.

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Notes:

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5. *Ibid.*
6. Goff, B. "Books Suitable for Use in Undergraduate Courses in the Old Testament," in *Journal of Bible and Religion* 6, 1938.
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9. *Ibid.*

10. *Springfield News*, February 12, 1948. Courtesy of Wellesley College Archives.

11. Goff, B. *Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia*. New Haven: 1963, xxxviii-xxxix.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Wellesley College Archives.

14. *Ibid.*