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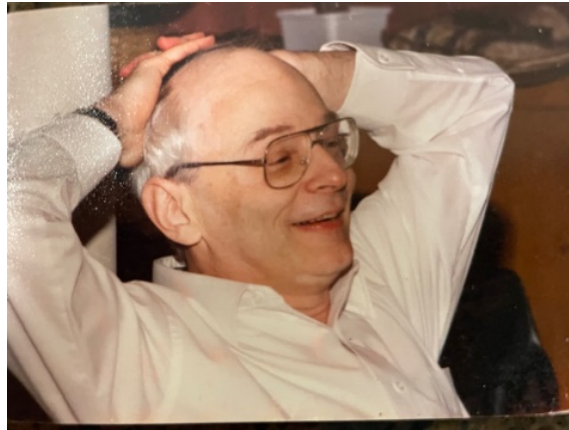
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Howard Jacobson

1940–2023



Howard Jacobson, the scion of a famous rabbinic family (Isiah Horowitz, “The Holy Sehla” was an ancestor) was born in 1940 in the Bronx to Rabbi David Jacobson and Jeannette Jacobson (née Signer). He received a Hebrew Day School education throughout high school and remained all his life a committed orthodox Jew and a Zionist.

Jacobson studied Classics at Columbia, with an intervening year at The University of Chicago, and in between also earned a B.A. in Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His teachers at Columbia were Moses Hadas, William Calder III, and Gilbert Highet, his adviser in his doctoral dissertation. After receiving his PhD in 1967 from Columbia, in 1968 Jacobson joined the excellent department of classics at the University of Illinois (at Champaign/Urbana), having also one of the best libraries in the U.S. at his disposal. He remained there for his entire career, with a year at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, until his retirement in 2004. He taught Greek and Latin as well as Comparative Literature courses, avoiding large classes and maintaining the highest standards.

His first book, *Ovid’s Heroides* (Princeton 1974), based on his doctoral dissertation, is a full philological commentary on the letters (but not on the “Double Heroines”), also offering deep insights into the psyche of the heroines. Next, he turned to his Jewish interests with *The Exagoge of Ezekiel* (Cambridge 1983). This is not only the only Jewish-Hellenistic tragedy known to us, but also the sole Hellenistic tragedy surviving in sufficient fragments for a reasonable reconstruction. The book offers an exhaustive discussion in the Introduction, both from the Hellenistic and the Jewish aspects as well as a new translation. In 1985 it won the coveted Charles J. Goodwin Award of Merit from the American Philological Association (now The Society for Classical Studies). His next book *A Commentary on Pseudo- Philo: Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum with Latin Text and English Translation*, 2 vols. (Leiden-New York-Cologne 1960) takes on a notoriously difficult text. The extant Latin translation was made from a Greek translation of the original Hebrew, and Jacobson’s translation and commentary excel particularly in new readings, emendations and translations and the many references to the assumed original biblical phraseology.

Clearly, Jacobson with his quest for understanding the text, was both the embodiment of the *philologos* as well as of the Talmudic scholar. Yet, excellent as his books are, to get a true insight into the width and depth of his interests and scholarship one has to turn to his shorter (and often of

the shortest) contributions, collected in *From Babel to Finnegans Wake: Collected Papers of Howard Jacobson* Edited by R Scott Smith (Champaign 2009). Just to give an idea of the riches of the collection of over 170 publications it suffices to follow the distribution into categories: Greek Studies 26 contributions (a miscellany, including a fair number of Homeric papers) Latin Studies 60 (mostly all the important classical poets, Lucretius taking first place), Hellenistic-Roman Judaism 26 (including a number written in preparation for his two last books), Judaica 36 (with many contributions combining Greco-Roman and Jewish sources; some contributions were originally written in Hebrew and have been translated for this volume), Hebraica-Semitaica 4, and closing the list (one remembers that Jacobson also taught Comp. Lit.) Renaissance and Later, 21 contributions, from Shakespeare and Milton to Racine and Blake, and indeed to *Finnegans Wake* (the interpretation of the two words Chur Heli as a reference to two last word out of the three of Jesus on the cross is a beauty).

All these contributions, without exception, appeared in journals (including the present one): no papers of conferences, *Festschriften* etc.: a scholar working in his study and his library, and clearly enjoying it, until his eagle eye catches a text that needs a new and better interpretation, an elaboration of hidden meanings or just plainly the correction of a commonly accepted misunderstanding of the text. Happy in his study and his library he did not move to other universities despite tempting offers, and the only visiting appointment he accepted was at The Hebrew University as Lady Davies Visiting Professor. He and Elaine also spent two happy Sabbaticals here and made many friends; fortunately for these, their visits to Israel became more frequent after one of their sons moved with his family to live here in 2005.

Howie (as he was known to his friends) and Elaine (née Finkelstein) had a beautiful loving marriage of 58 years; much happiness was added by their four sons and their growing families – Howie made a point of himself preparing all their grandchildren for their Bar and Bat Mitzva. Sadly, he had to give up active scholarship for the last dozen years or so of his life due to an incurable and worsening condition of his eyesight and other ailments. Only the couples' strong bond and their steadfast character enabled them to pass these increasingly difficult years without a complaint. He died of a terminal illness and was brought to eternal rest in the Holy Land.

Joseph Geiger