

OBITUARIES

Ze'ev Rubin

(September 23 1942- May 28 2009)

Ze'ev was 66 when he died suddenly in the late spring of last year and hence tragically young for a scholar whose extraordinary abilities, extraordinary linguistic range, and constantly expanding curiosity were due to find fulfilment in major works which were still in preparation. A real grief was felt all round the world of Late Antique and Near Eastern scholarship. A unique personality and a unique talent had abruptly been taken from us.

My experience of Ze'ev went back to the late 60's, so some forty years ago, when I became the Supervisor of his Oxford thesis. His complete absence of worldly know-how, his dedication to his work and his extraordinary linguistic gifts all became immediately apparent. He seemed to have no problem with Greek, or with any modern scholarly language, and could speak English in complex, perfectly-formed sentences.

The particular topic on which he had already embarked, the religious propaganda of the Severan regime as seen between the lines of Herodian's *History*, was not in my view an ideal one, and did not bring out the exceptional strengths which he was later to show. But the thesis was duly completed, and was later published in 1980 in the *Collection Latomus*, after he had returned to Tel-Aviv to teach in the Department of History.

His future, however, lay not in Classical Roman History, but in the complex world of Late Antiquity and the history of Christianity, in the period when it was a dominant force. His contributions cover the whole Mediterranean region, and even the conversion of the Franks. But, looking at his publications, one can see three major centres of interest emerging: firstly, Christian Palestine (I wonder if his papers on this area might not be collected as volume?); secondly, the Eastern frontier, and relations with Persia, from the Red Sea to Mesopotamia; and thirdly, developing out of that, Sasanian history-writing as reflected in post-Islamic narratives in Arabic.

To say that is at once to touch on the most extraordinary of his gifts, the capacity to absorb, without apparent effort, a whole series of difficult languages. So far as I am aware, he never underwent any instruction in Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Geez or Epigraphic South Arabian. He simply took up the study of these languages on his own, as and when they were required for his scholarly enquiries.

Perhaps I may add a small anecdote illustrating this truly remarkable linguistic capacity. One of my most prized books is *The New Testament in Scots*, a translation into Scottish dialect which even I can find difficult, and which English colleagues regard as wholly baffling. When I showed this work to Ze'ev, he instantly read off a paragraph in a quite convincing accent and with full comprehension.

It was Ze'ev's indefatigable intellectual curiosity and his preparedness to take on wholly new fields of enquiry which were both the main feature of his work in recent decades and the reason why so much was left incomplete.

Ze'ev was a sincere and absolutely genuine person, a devoted husband and father, and the most loyal of friends. He was also utterly un-selfseeking, and not very well equipped to adjust himself to the practicalities of any particular situation, as anyone who ever travelled in a car driven by him will recall with extreme clarity.

He was also the most dedicated and curious of scholars, and produced a wonderful series of studies of the Sasanian empire, and of its historiography as reflected in Islamic sources. But in practical terms his high academic standards and his determination to wrestle with problems along the way meant that his intended translation of Tabari's account of the Sasanian period was never finished, and the work was carried out by someone else. Equally, only some elements of what would have been a wonderful contribution to 'Translated Texts for Historians', on *Religious and*

Economic Struggles in the Red Sea Basin, were ever completed. And above all we are left without his major book on the *Historiography of Iran*. Perhaps something can be saved from these major projects. But above all we mourn the sudden loss of a truly dedicated and talented scholar, and a wholly innocent and lovable person.

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