

IN MEMORIAM



GIDEON GOLDBERG
(1930–2013)

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Professor Gideon Goldenberg passed away in Jerusalem on Tuesday, 30 July, 2013. Within his general interest in Semitic languages, and especially in syntax, Syriac always occupied a significant place. He is the author of many authoritative publications in the field of Syriac syntax and grammar.

Gideon Goldenberg was born in Tel-Aviv on 1 February, 1930. His parents were immigrants from Russia to the Land of Israel, the British Mandate of Palestine, in the first decade of the twentieth century. When he was six, the family moved to a Moshav near Tel-Aviv. He went to primary school there and to high school in Tel-Aviv. In 1947 he joined the Palmach, the elite force of the Haganna, then took part in the Israeli War of Independence, and lived in Kibbutz Revivim, in the Negev, for a year.

In 1952 he began his studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. For his B.A. (1952-1955) his areas of study were Hebrew Language and Scripture (Miqra). In 1956 he received his Master's degree in Hebrew Language, for which he worked, under the supervision of Professor Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai (Torczyner), on the manuscripts of a work by Rabbi Levi Ben Gershon, the famous fourteenth-century Jewish scholar from southern France. At the same time he began to study linguistics and languages. He studied Latin, Greek, Turkish, Coptic, several Semitic languages (Arabic, Akkadian, Ethiopian languages, Syriac, and Neo-Aramaic dialects), and European languages (English, French, German, Russian, and Italian). He also knew Yiddish. Among his teachers he developed a very special and lasting relationship with Professor Hans Jakob Polotsky (d. 1991), under whose supervision he wrote his Ph.D. dissertation, on the Amharic Tense System (Jerusalem, 1966, in Hebrew).

In 1959 Gideon Goldenberg accepted an appointment at Tel-Aviv University. After having taught there for some time, he co-founded the Department of Arabic and, in 1969, he founded the Department of Semitic Linguistics, which he directed for nearly twenty years. In 1987 he left Tel-Aviv University and accepted an appointment at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he had already worked part-time for several years. He was a member of the Departments of Hebrew Language and Linguistics and served as chair in both departments. He retired from this position in 1998, but continued to teach select courses until 2010. He also taught at the University of Addis Ababa, at the University of California, Los Angeles, at the University of Naples, and at the University of Leiden.

In 1979 he was elected a member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language. In 1993 he was the recipient of the Israel Prize for Language Sciences. In 1996 he was elected a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and in 1999 a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. He worked until his last days. He gave his final lecture on 26 June, at a conference on "Neo-Aramaic Dialectology: Jews, Christians, and Mandaeans," organized at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The topic of his lecture was "Impersonals."

Within Gideon Goldenberg's broader study of Semitic syntax, Syriac occupied an important place from early on. In his 1971 study of the "Tautological Infinitive" [no. 1] the two patterns of this structure existing in Syriac – the one with the infinitive in extraposition and the other with the infinitive followed by the pronoun (*h*)*u*, to be analyzed as a "cleft sentence" – are discussed in great detail and placed within their larger Aramaic, Semitic, and general linguistic contexts. The "cleft sentence" and its Syriac representations received further attention, first in a short article in 1977 on "Imperfectly-Transformed Cleft Sentences" [no. 2] and, in greater detail, in a 1990 article to which he gave the exquisite title "On Some Niceties of Syriac Syntax" [no. 5]. As a strategy of rhematization, the enclitic pronoun (*h*)*u* is capable of transforming any preceding word or phrase into the predicate of a nominal clause, even while the relative *dalath*, which would usually nominalize the rest of the sentence, is absent. E.g.: *l-mēlap (h)u šābē (')nā* "Learning is what I want to do." (Comp. *Semitic Languages* [no. 14], 189-192). The question of rhematization is taken up again, along with several other topics, in his 1995 article "Bible Translations and Syriac Idiom" [no. 8].

Gideon Goldenberg's lengthy essay "On Syriac Sentence Structure" [no. 3, 1983] is the most comprehensive and thorough study of Syriac syntax since the standard grammars of Theodor Nöldeke (1880 and 1898) and Rubens Duval (1881). Based on a solid corpus of early Syriac texts, the study focuses on the Syriac expressions of predication. The two types of predication, verbal and non-verbal, are seen in analogy to each other, the latter type being in the process of verbalization, the highest degree of which is found in the participle assuming the function of the finite verb. A wide array of topics related to the verbless ("nominal") clause is discussed, and the various types of *'it* sentences receive special attention. Some further clarifications on the verbless clause are found in a short essay from 2006 [no. 11].

Other topics that Gideon Goldenberg discussed with much incisiveness include predicative adjectives in Syriac (focusing on cases in which the emphatic rather than the absolute state is used) [no. 6, 1991] and Syriac perfect forms. In a remarkable study of "Aramaic Perfects" [no. 7, 1992], he traces the evolution of the expressions of the perfect and past tense from Syriac well into Neo-Aramaic, explaining in the process the emergence of

distinctively marked expressions of resultative perfect based on the perfect/passive participle.

Many of his observations on Syriac, found throughout his many publications, resurface in his magnum opus, *Semitic Languages* [no. 14, 2013 – which appeared a few months before his death], and are given here a wider context and additional significance. The importance of Syriac resided for him not only in the wealth and the diversity of the preserved materials, but also in its uniquely documented prosodic features, a testimony to the “syntactical sensitivity” of Syriac authors, scholars, and scribes. Very telling in this regard is the following comment, found in his essay on “The Contribution of Semitic Languages to Linguistic Thinking” [no. 4, 1987-1988, p. 11 – reprinted as the lead essay in no. 10, 1998]:

“To the credit of Syriac writers in the field of linguistic scholarship we ought to mention the careful study (in grammars, and even more in textual commentaries on the Scriptures) of prosodic features, like enclitic and independent pronouns, independent *hwā* vs. enclitic *wā* etc. Far from the verdict pronounced by some Orientalists, Syriac is one of the finest languages that I know with regard to syntactical sensitivity, much of which is connected with prosodic distinctions, and the linguistic tradition of the Syrians has carefully documented and preserved such distinctions of which we know very little in other dead languages.”

Such reflections are obviously concerned with the language in its most creative stage. Our study of the Syriac language, therefore, should be primarily based on original prose writings belonging to the period in which the language was still fully alive. As for the language of the Peshitta, both the Old Testament and the New Testament, Gideon Goldenberg had some doubts about their “stylistic status and idiomatic authenticity” (“Bible Translations and Syriac Idiom” [no. 8], p. 25), even while agreeing with Nöldeke that the Old Syriac Gospels, in virtue of their “flowing idiomatic style” are superior to the Peshitta (ibid., p. 25, and “On Predicative Adjectives and Syriac Syntax” [no. 6], p. 723). Throughout his work he regularly used biblical texts without, however, losing awareness of their possible limitations. The Syriac commentary tradition occasionally provides precious insights into the ways in which features of biblical language were understood by native speakers. Additionally, Gideon Goldenberg was always eager to listen to

Barhebraeus' testimony, either in his grammatical works or in his commentaries, as an – admittedly much later – representative of indigenous Syriac tradition. Barhebraeus' works also serve to illustrate the importance of the process of transmission for our study of the classical texts. This includes various aspects of vowel notation, touched upon in several publications [and specifically dealt with in no. 13], but also the impact of the Arabic grammatical tradition on the indigenous tradition of Syriac grammarians. Gideon Goldenberg deserves our profound gratitude for having raised a great number of such important questions and for letting us benefit from his insights and erudition in trying to answer them.

My observations are limited to Gideon Goldenberg's work that is directly relevant to Syriac studies. In addition, he has major publications dealing with general and comparative Semitic linguistics, Hebrew and Arabic grammar and linguistic tradition, Ethiopian languages, Modern South-Arabian, and Neo-Aramaic. His students were instrumental in bringing together and reprinting a number of his articles in two volumes: *Studies in Semitic Linguistics. Selected Writings* [no. 10, 1998] and *Further Studies in Semitic Linguistics* [no. 15, 2013]. The former volume also has the English translation, by Shmuel Bar, of two essays previously published in Hebrew. Following a Hebrew language Jubilee volume, edited by Moshe Bar-Asher in 1997 [no. 9], a Festschrift containing sixteen contributions written in English and German by students, colleagues, and friends, and edited by Tali Bar and Eran Cohen, was published in 2007 [no. 12].

Gideon Goldenberg leaves a rich legacy to future generations of students of Syriac and Semitic linguistics. He was a man of great erudition and much wisdom, inhabiting as many worlds as languages he knew. The company of his wife Esther, children, grandchildren, and friends was always very precious to him. Even in his old age, in spite of what he described as “the growing fragility of the body” and the need to “walk through the streets of Jerusalem with staff in hand” (cf. Zechariah 8:4), he never complained (for, he once wrote, “after all, if I had been a football player I would have finished my career at the age of thirty”) and never lost sight of his friends. It is painful to lose him, but we are grateful for the richness of his life and work.

Main publications involving Syriac:

1. "Tautological Infinitive," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971), 36-85. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics* [no. 10], 66-115.
2. "Imperfectly-Transformed Cleft Sentences," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem, 1977), vol. 1, 127-133. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 116-122.
3. "On Syriac Sentence-Structure," in M. Sokoloff (ed.), *Arameans, Aramaic and the Aramaic Literary Tradition* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1983), 97-140. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 525-568.
4. "The Contribution of Semitic Languages to Linguistic Thinking," *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux* 30 (1987-1988), 107-115. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 1-9.
5. "On Some Niceties of Syriac Syntax," in R. Lavenant (ed.), *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 236; Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1990), 335-344. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 569-578.
6. "On Predicative Adjectives and Syriac Syntax," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 48 (1991), 716-726. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 579-590.
7. "Aramaic Perfects," *Israel Oriental Studies* 12 (1992), 113-137. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 605-629.
8. "Bible Translations and Syriac Idiom," in P.B. Dirksen and A. van der Kooij (eds.), *The Peshitta as a Translation. Papers Read at the II Peshitta Symposium Held at Leiden 19-21 August 1993* (Monographs of the Peshitta Institute Leiden, 8; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 25-39. Reprinted in *Studies in Semitic Linguistics*, 591-604.
9. Moshe Bar-Asher (ed.), *ספר היובל לגדעון גולדנברג* ("Jubilee Volume for Gideon Goldenberg") (Masorot. Studies in Language Traditions and Jewish Languages, 9-10-11; Jerusalem: Institute of Jewish Studies, 1997) – with a biography by Shlomo Raz, 13-18 [Hebrew].
10. *Studies in Semitic Linguistics. Selected Writings* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1998).
11. "Comments on 'Three Approaches to the Tripartite Nominal Clause in Syriac' by Wido van Peursen and Jan Joosten," in P.S.F. van Keulen and W.Th. van Peursen (eds.), *Corpus Linguistics and Textual History: A Computer-assisted Interdisciplinary*

- Approach to the Pesbitta* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica, 48; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2006), 175-184.
12. Tali Bar and Eran Cohen (eds.), *Studies in Semitic and General Linguistics in Honor of Gideon Goldenberg* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 334; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2007).
 13. “הניקודים הסוריים ושיטותיהם” (“Methods of Vowel Notation in Syriac”), in Rafael I. (Singer) Zer and Yosef Ofer (eds.), *Israel. Linguistic Studies in the Memory of Israel Yeivin* (Publications of the Hebrew University Bible Project, 6; Jerusalem: The Mendel Institute of Jewish Studies, 2011), 65-78 [Hebrew].
 14. *Semitic Languages. Features, Structures, Relations, Processes* (Oxford: University Press, 2013).
 15. *Further Studies in Semitic Linguistics* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 405; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013).

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