

BEN SEGAL (1912-2003)

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- [1] Judah Benzion ‘Ben’ Segal, scholar of Semitic languages, born June 21 1912; died October 23 2003.¹
- [2] Judah “Ben” Segal, who has died aged 91, was a leading scholar in the field of Aramaic and Hebrew studies. He was professor of Semitic languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), in the University of London, from 1961 until his retirement in 1979.
- [3] Among much else, he was largely responsible for a degree course that allowed students to study all the major languages of the Semitic family, including Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Akkadian and Ethiopic. This course, which sadly no longer exists, was unique in a British university at the time, and provided an excellent training for those who wished to undertake a research degree in Semitic philology. It ensured that students gained a thorough knowledge of the languages and were able to read the most challenging texts, rather than simply learning “about” the languages.
- [4] Segal’s own research was wide ranging. Several of his publications concerned the Christian Aramaic dialect known as Syriac, and the culture and literature of eastern Christianity. His first book, *The Diacritical Point and the Accents in Syriac* (1953), a study of the vowels of Syriac, is greatly admired by Semitic philologists and often regarded as one of his best works.
- [5] In 1970, he published *Edessa: The Blessed City*, an erudite but very accessible historical study of the city of Edessa, modern Urfa in southern Turkey, where the Syriac language had its origins. He also made major contributions in the field of Hebrew and Jewish history; his book *The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to AD 70* (1963) quickly became a standard work.
- [6] In retirement, Segal continued his scholarly research with considerable energy. In 1981, he was awarded a Leverhulme emeritus fellowship, which allowed him to conduct research in

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India on the Jews of Cochin, resulting in the publication, in 1993, of his definitive work on the subject, *A History of the Jews of Cochin*.

- [7] He also continued to make important contributions to Aramaic studies through his publication of *Aramaic texts from North Saqqara, with some Fragments in Phoenician* (1983) and his *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (2000, in collaboration with Erica Hunter).

- [8] Born in Newcastle, Segal was educated at Magdalen College school, Oxford, and graduated with a first-class tripos degree in Oriental languages from Cambridge University in 1935. He returned to Oxford to study for a research degree, and was awarded a DPhil there in 1939. His outstanding ability won him a series of prizes and scholarships.

- [9] Most of his later academic colleagues and students were not aware that he had distinguished himself in action during the second world war, to the extent that, in 1942, he had been awarded the Military Cross for bravery.

- [10] Earlier that year, he was sent more than 100 miles behind German lines in north Africa to report on the movements of Rommel's forces, and give advance warnings of planned attacks. He spent several weeks in secret hideouts with local Arabs, whose language he could speak. His regular reports helped save many allied lives. Narrowly avoiding capture on several occasions, he led an operation that resulted in the capture of the Libyan town of Derna, which proved to be crucial for the advance of Montgomery's 8th Army.

- [11] After the war, Segal pursued an academic career, as had his father, the distinguished Hebrew scholar M.H. Segal. In 1946, he joined SOAS, where he spent his entire career, as a lecturer in Hebrew and Aramaic, was promoted to reader in 1955, and took a chair in Semitic languages in 1961. In 1968, he was elected to a fellowship of the British Academy.

- [12] It was my privilege to be his student at SOAS in the late 1970s, and I was, at first, overawed at being taught by a scholar of such eminence and erudition. Segal's quiet, gentle approach, however, soon made me feel completely at ease. In those days, more importance was attached to passing on scholarship to a younger generation than to maximising the number of students in the class. Indeed, I was often the only student on the courses that he taught.

[13] His public-spiritedness was demonstrated on numerous occasions, especially when, at the age of 70, he agreed to become director of the progressive London Jewish seminary, Leo Baeck College, and worked resolutely to save it from imminent closure.

[14] His wife Leah, whom he married in 1946, survives him, as do their two daughters.