BEN SEGAL *J. Appel & Co*

Judah Benzion ('Ben') Segal
1912–2003

I

BEN SEGAL had a long career as a teacher of Semitic languages, all of it at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. His principal interest was in Aramaic and Syriac—in addition, of course, to Hebrew and the other main Semitic tongues. Before his teaching career he was employed in the Sudan Civil Service and, during the Second World War, his service was frequently behind the enemy lines in North Africa.

Ben Segal was born at Newcastle (where his father was a Rabbi for some time) on 21 June 1912. His father, Moses Hirsch (Zvi) Segal (1876–1968), was born in Lithuania and was educated in London and Oxford where he served as tutor in biblical and Semitic studies under the great S. R. Driver. In 1926 he transferred to Jerusalem where he became a lecturer in Bible (full professor in 1939), and in that capacity he was the present writer's teacher. He also wrote a grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew which is unsurpassed to the present day. He married a daughter (Hannah Leah)[1] of Aryeh Leib Frumkin (1845–1916) who was Ben's mother. Ben's elder brother Samuel (1902–85) was a physician and politician (Labour Member of Parliament) and one of the first life peers. The Frumkins were early residents of Palestine, and Aryeh Leib founded Petach Tiqvah ('gate of Hope') near Tel Aviv.

[1] Cf. an article about her in the *Jewish Chronicle Literary Supplement*, 25 Dec. 1961.

Proceedings of the British Academy, **130**, 205–212.

Ben was educated at Magdalen College School, Oxford, and at St Catharine's College, Cambridge. He was John Stewart of Rannoch Scholar in Hebrew, 1933; and obtained a first-class in the oriental languages Tripos in 1935. In 1936 he was Tyrwhitt scholar and Mason prizeman, and received his Cambridge BA in 1935 (MA 1938). Those who knew the peaceful and self-effacing Ben well, must have been surprised that he was a boxing blue, though when the occasion demanded it there could be steel in his temperament. From 1936 to 1939 he was Mansel Research Exhibitioner at St John's College, Oxford, as well as James Mew Scholar in 1937; he received his Oxford D.Phil. in 1939.

After his university education he joined the Sudan Civil Service as Deputy Assistant Director, Public Security, 1939–41. In 1940 he came on leave to Jerusalem to visit his parents. His father, my teacher, introduced me to his son who was eight years my senior. Both having studied similar Semitic languages, the beginnings of a friendship developed between us which lasted in increasing measure (later including our wives) to his dying day.

During the 1939–45 war he was attached to GHQ Middle East Forces (1942–4) to carry out, thanks to his knowledge of Arabic, secret operations ahead of Montgomery's Eighth Army and behind Rommel's lines. He had been introduced to David Stirling, founder of the SAS; and with some others Segal was conveyed behind the German and Italian fronts to lay up for three months, in very primitive conditions, to radio back to Cairo all intelligence on enemy tank and aircraft movements. His team would move from cave to cave to avoid detection; they used informers to obtain details of enemy plans. With the help of local Arabs he seized the key Libyan town of Derna. He crowned that achievement by flying from a town-hall window the Union Jack—rapidly sewn together from his handkerchief and a collection of colourful rags. This is now on view in the Imperial War Museum. His feat, a combination of high courage and practical prowess, was recognised by the award of the Military Cross.

In his last little book, entitled *Whisper Awhile*, he refers to these operations—but in so self-effacing a manner that the connection between those exploits and the MC is mentioned only in the publishers' blurb. *Whisper Awhile*, in all its chapters, is a gem of a book. Segal and his group had several close escapes from German and Italian search parties, but they managed to report back, often walking hundreds of miles from hideout to hideout. Though given 'licence to kill' any spies among the Arabs, Segal preferred to move his hideouts rather than taking a life. At Derna

he had succeeded in releasing some Allied prisoners of war. To protect his identity he was referred to as Captain Seagrim.

On his return to civilian life he joined SOAS, at first principally as lecturer in Aramaic and Hebrew. In 1961, when the Chair of Semitic languages fell vacant, on the retirement of Professor C. J. Gadd, the appointing committee had difficulty in reaching a unanimous decision about his successor. Both Gadd and his predecessor, Sidney Smith, were essentially Assyriologists and had come from the British Museum. The external referees favoured a similar decision and strongly urged the appointment of Donald Wiseman to the Chair of Assyriology, while the internal referees suggested a distinguished Semitist, Ben Segal. The externals eventually prevailed, and Wiseman became a highly successful holder of the Chair of Assyriology. Sir Cyril Philips, the Director of SOAS, then got in touch with me at Manchester (where I occupied the Chair of Semitic languages) and asked me whether I would be able to make a convincing case for Ben Segal to be appointed to an *ad hominem* Chair of Semitic languages. No easier task had ever been entrusted to me, and Segal's elevation to the Chair occurred without delay in 1961; it remained in his charge until 1979 when he reached the age of retirement.

In those days the distinction between established chairs and *ad hominem* ones was still in place, and I considered the Semitics Chair of greater significance than my, by then, established Chair of Ethiopian Studies at SOAS. My proposal was acted upon and the two Chairs were amalgamated. At the present time there is no Chair of Semitic languages at SOAS—and indeed anywhere in Britain in the full sense—except at Cambridge where it is occupied most worthily by Professor Geoffrey Khan, one of the ablest graduates of SOAS, a pupil of both Segal and myself. From 1961 to 1968 Segal was Head of the Department of the Near and Middle East. After retirement he became an Honorary Fellow of SOAS. He was particularly pleased, especially as a Jew, to be called as a Visiting Lecturer to Ain Shams University, Cairo, in 1979.

Afterwards he accepted the principalship of the Leo Baeck College (1982–5), a liberal training institution for rabbis and Jewish studies in general. He was also an active member of the Council of Christians and Jews and President of the North Western Reform Synagogue as well as of the British Association for Jewish Studies (1980). An unusual honour was the bestowal on him of the Freedom of the City of Urfa, in Turkey, in 1973—the 'blessed city' of Edessa on which Segal had written a mighty tome. In 1968 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy whose meetings he attended deep into his eighties.

The first of his major publications was *The Diacritical Point and the Accents in Syriac* (1953), an important work but aimed at the specialist rather than the general reader. This limitation is decidely not the case as regards *The Hebrew Passover* (1963). Segal himself says in his preface that 'the influence of the Passover on the ritual and thought of Judaism and Christianity has probably been more profound than that of any other festival'. He discusses in detail the sources and the tradition based on the historical documents as well as modern theories on the origins and early development of the Passover, including the 'primitive Passover' and the 'Passover in Canaan'. Altogether this is a book of absorbing interest.

His *Edessa* book (1970) is a work of large format running to over three hundred pages and may probably be considered his *magnum opus*. It is beautifully written and richly illustrated. Pope Eugenius III wrote to King Louis VII of France in 1145 of 'The city [of Edessa] that was ruled by Christians and alone served the Lord when, long ago, the whole world in the East was under the sway of pagans.' The book is the outcome of five visits to Urfa (the modern name of Edessa) between 1952 and 1966. His chapters deal with Edessa under the Kings; the blessing of Jesus and the triumph of Christianity; life at Edessa, AD 240–639; and the last five centuries, 639–1146.

One of Segal's other abiding interests concerned the Jews of Cochin whose history he published in 1993. They form a tiny community on the Spice Coast of south-west India and have done so for some two thousand years. According to legend, the apostle Thomas found a Jewish presence in this area. The earliest extant record is an inscription, dated AD 1000, in Malayalam on copper plates, by which Indian princes granted exemption from taxation to one Joseph Rabban. At about the same time a largely autonomous Jewish principality was set up near Cochin. The Cochin Jews probably never numbered more than two thousand. When Indian independence was closely followed by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, most of the community emigrated to the new state. Today only a handful of Jews remain in Cochin.

The last massive volume from Segal's pen is a *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (2000). In an excellent review of this remarkable work, John Healey writes (*Journal of Semitic Studies*, 48, autumn 2003) that 'this is one of those books which has been long awaited by scholars in the field, but the wait was well worth it. Here we have the definitive publication and study of one of the world's most important collections of incantation bowls, apparently sur-

passed numerically only by the collection of the Iraq Museum' (if that still exists in a usable state). 'The volume is set to become a primary source of reference in Aramaic studies and script development.'

I must briefly revert to *Whisper Awhile*, his last book, running to seven unconnected chapters of some ninety pages altogether. Each chapter has an autobiographical flavour, but the word 'I' is used in an almost impersonal sense, for self-effacement was the core of Segal's personality. The book was never intended for sale, but was given to family and close friends. When he told me that the supply had been exhausted, I approached an acquaintance in the Oxford University Press, for the original publishers were no longer in business. The OUP were immensely helpful and produced some three hundred copies photographically for a largely notional remuneration.

Like many of us, Ben could also be quirky: on one occasion he invited a colleague from another college and asked me to join them at lunch at SOAS. Once the colleague had departed I handed to Ben the money I owed him for my lunch. He accepted it, but the next morning he telephoned to say that we could not meet, the two of us with our wives, as had been arranged for that evening, because he felt so hurt that I had paid him the money for my lunch. I urged him to forgive me, for I had done that quite innocently. He forgave me and we agreed to reinstate our meeting that evening, on the express condition that he would pay and that I would promise not to do so. When the waiter handed the bill to me, I immediately pushed it towards Ben. He rummaged in his wallet but could not find what he wanted. He then turned to me and asked me to pay after all. I said I could not possibly do so, since he would not expect me to break my word . . .

Altogether Ben was that rare scholar whose character and learning shone in equal measure. He and his wife Leah (Seidemann), with their two daughters, Miriam and Naomi, had a happy and serene relationship. Ben died of cancer and cardiac failure in London on 23 October 2003, aged 91.

There were detailed obituaries in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*. That in *The Independent* was by Arthur Irvine and is particularly good and exhaustive.

A memorial service took place in his synagogue on 30 November. There were three brief addresses before a large congregation. The Qaddish prayer is normally said by a son or the nearest male relative. On this occasion it was beautifully recited by his daughter Naomi, a most salutary departure from the usual compulsory restriction to males.

II

It will probably be in the area of Aramaic studies that Ben Segal will be best remembered in the academic world. Here his interests and abilities were unusually wide-ranging: whereas most scholars in this field specialise in one particular dialect of Aramaic or one particular period or topic, Segal's publications range in date from Imperial Aramaic texts of the sixth to fifth century BC to Modern Aramaic proverbs of the twentieth century AD,[2] and they cover in between Hatran[3] as well as Syriac and Mandaic from the first millennium AD; the topics he chose to write on were likewise admirably varied: language, palaeography, epigraphy, history, and religion. Though two of his major publications, the meticulous edition of the lamentably fragmentary Aramaic texts of the Achaemenid period from Saqqara,[4] and his catalogue of the British Museum's collection of Mandaic magic bowls,[5] concern dialects other than Syriac, it was in the area of Syriac studies that much of his most important work was done.

His early *The Diacritical Point and the Accents in Syriac* (London, 1953), based on early manuscripts in the British Library's exceptionally fine collection of Syriac manuscripts, will doubtless continue for a long time to provide the essential starting point for the subject. A series of visits, in the 1950s, to Urfa, ancient Edessa, in south-east Turkey and the discovery of pagan Syriac inscriptions resulted in several important articles, in *Anatolian Studies* (1953) and elsewhere. Hitherto the number of Syriac inscriptions from the first to the third centuries AD had been extremely meagre; Segal's discoveries, and their careful publication, increased their number significantly, and many of the inscriptions now collected in H. J. W. Drijvers and J. F. Healey's *The Old Syriac Inscriptions of Edessa and Osrhoene* (1999) had received their initial publication by Segal in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*.

His work on the early Edessene inscriptions led to an interest in the history of this ancient centre of Syriac culture; this culminated with the

[2] 'Neo-Aramaic proverbs of the Jews of Zakho', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 14 (1955), 251–70.

[3] 'Arabs at Hatra and the vicinity: marginalia on new Aramaic texts', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 31 (1986), 57–80.

[4] *Aramaic Texts from North Saqqara with some Fragments in Phoenician* (London, 1983). The various different points of interest that these unpromising scraps offer are usefully drawn out by H. G. M. Williamson in his review in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 73 (1987), 265–9.

[5] *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London, 2000).

publication, in 1970, of his best known and most widely read book, *Edessa, 'the Blessed City'*, covering the history of the city up to its capture by Zangi in 1146. This is an eminently readable work, and one based on a close familiarity with the scattered Syriac sources; its one drawback for the scholar is that the references to the many different chronicles quoted are left nonchalantly vague, and so anyone in search of these who does not share Segal's intimate knowledge of the sources is likely to find this aspect of his work not a little frustrating. For the more general reader, however, this is not a great problem, and it is perhaps thanks to the absence of pages overburdened with references that the book has reached a wider readership, and has been translated into both Turkish and Arabic (1988); it also earned its author the Freedom of the Municipality of Şanliurfa.

Side products of the intimate knowledge he had gained of the Syriac chronicles can be seen in a series of valuable articles, 'Mesopotamian Communities from Julian to the rise of Islam',[6] 'Syriac chronicles as source material for the history of Islamic peoples',[7] 'The Jews of North Mesopotamia before the rise of Islam',[8] and 'Arabs in Syriac literature before the rise of Islam'.[9]

In September 1987 Segal visited Kerala in order to attend the First International Syriac Conference at the recently founded St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI), in Kottayam (Kerala), which specialises in the Syriac tradition of the indigenous Churches of Kerala. One outcome of this visit to India was his history of the Jews of Kerala, mentioned by Professor Ullendorff. At the conference itself he returned to the topic he had started out with, namely the diacritical point, though here he dealt with an important feature which he had deliberately not touched on in his earlier monograph, namely the use of the point to indicate *Qushshaya* ('hardening') and *Rukkaka* ('softening'). Though his paper was published among the other conference papers in SEERI's own periodical *The Harp: A Journal of Syriac and Oriental Studies* (1:2/3 (1988), 13–20), a longer (and more accurately printed!) form subsequently appeared in a rather more accessible place.[10] This return to the beginning, as it were, proved to be his last contribution to Syriac studies. At the time of Segal's first publications in Syriac studies this was an academic field

[6] *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 41 (1955), 109–39.
[7] In B. Lewis and P. M. Holt (eds.), *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), pp. 246–58.
[8] In the Festschrift for his father, M. H. Segal, edited by J. M. Grintz and J. Liver (Jerusalem, 1964), pp. 32*–63*.
[9] *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 4 (1984), 89–128.
[10] *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 34 (1989), 483–91.

that was little cultivated: the very considerable revival of interest that the last three decades have witnessed is in no small part due to the stimulus provided by two books, one being R. Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (1975), and the other, Ben Segal's *Edessa, 'the Blessed City'*, of five years earlier.

Part I EDWARD ULLENDORFF
Fellow of the Academy

Part II SEBASTIAN BROCK
Fellow of the Academy