

CYRUS H. GORDON (1908–2001):  
A GIANT AMONG SCHOLARS

GARY A. RENDSBURG, Cornell University

Cyrus H. Gordon, one of the true giants in the fields of biblical studies and ancient Near Eastern studies, died on March 30, 2001, at the age of 92, at his home in Brookline, Mass. Gordon's career was intimately connected to the city in which this journal is published and to the two institutions which underlie its history. Gordon was born in Philadelphia; he took his three degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, all the while taking courses at Dropsie College as well; and later he returned to the latter as a faculty member (see below for details). Accordingly, it is most gratifying for me to publish this tribute to my beloved teacher in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*.

With Gordon's passing, the world of scholarship has lost not only a brilliant intellectual, but also the last link to a distant past. I refer not to antiquity, but rather to the period of the 1920s and 1930s, when academic Nephilim walked the earth, when the Near East still was untouched by modernity, and when the major discoveries at Nuzi and Ugarit were revolutionizing biblical studies. Together these elements created an age now romanticized by younger scholars, one known only through the publications of academics mostly long dead, yet Cyrus Gordon was there for it all.

Gordon became involved in the field at a very young age: he published his first article in 1929 at age 21, and he paid his first visit to the Near East in 1931 at age 23. Because of this early start, Gordon knew personally many of the luminaries of the early 20th century: his famed teachers James Montgomery and Max Margolis, the archaeologists Sir Flinders Petrie and Sir Leonard Woolley, the Assyriologist F. Thureau-Dangin, the biblicalist Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange of the École Biblique, the great modern Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik, the talmudist Yaakov Nahum Epstein, and many similar individuals. A story that Gordon related to me only a year or so ago illustrates the point well: at a recent informal gathering in Boston, Gordon was describing his early fieldwork to a young archaeologist from Harvard, when the young man turned to Gordon and said with amazement, "You dug with Woolley at Ur and you're still alive?"

During the four years of 1931–1935, Gordon experienced a traditional Near Eastern lifestyle that is rapidly disappearing from this world. The majority of this time was spent in Iraq, in small villages, living among Arabs, Kurds, Yezidis, Mandeans, and Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians. But

he also dug with W. F. Albright at Tell Beit Mirsim, and he accompanied Nelson Glueck on his famed exploration of Transjordan. Gordon constantly peppered his classes and his publications with firsthand observations of the Near East gained during these years, often illuminating biblical passages through parallels across time. He delighted to relate his life story, both orally, to anyone who was interested in hearing his recollections, and in print, as he did on a number of occasions. The most detailed of these versions appeared in his autobiography *A Scholar's Odyssey*, published in 2000 by the Society of Biblical Literature.

Gordon was born in Philadelphia on June 29, 1908, to a Jewish family that greatly valued education, both modern scientific learning and traditional Jewish learning. In Gordon's words, "I grew up in a home where ancient texts and modern enlightenment were harmoniously intertwined without the needless extremism of either the William Jennings Bryan or the Clarence Darrow variety." As was typical in Jewish homes of that time, Gordon's father obtained the services of a *melammed*, or personal teacher, to teach the young inquisitive Cyrus, starting at the age of five. Gordon showed a clear proclivity for languages, and during his teen years started mastering not only Hebrew, but also Aramaic, Latin, and German. He enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, from which he would receive all three of his degrees, B.A. (1927), M.A. (1928), and Ph.D. (1930). As an undergraduate, he added Greek, Arabic, and Swedish through formal study. But this ever-growing list of languages was not enough for the expanding mind of the young scholar. Gordon recalled, "One summer I decided to learn French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and Dano-Norwegian by myself, through studying each one of them one hour per day during the three-month vacation." And, of course, there are the various Near Eastern languages that Gordon studied at Penn, namely, Sumerian, Akkadian, Syriac, Mandaic, Ethiopic, South Arabic, Egyptian, Coptic, Hittite, Hurrian, and Old Persian. His main teachers of this panoply of subjects were Montgomery and E. A. Speiser. During the years that he studied at Penn, Gordon simultaneously audited courses at nearby Dropsie College, under the tutelage of Margolis, arguably the greatest scholar of Biblical Hebrew that ever lived. Later Gordon turned his attention to Minoan and more recently to Eblaite.

With this education, it is no surprise that Gordon was destined to make major contributions in the area of Near Eastern languages. As an Israeli colleague remarked to me several years ago, כורש הוא מלך השפות, "Cyrus, he's the king of the languages."

Most scholars in the field consider Gordon's most important contribution to be his series of books on Ugaritic, beginning with *Ugaritic Grammar* of 1940 and culminating with *Ugaritic Textbook* of 1965. When the Ugaritic texts were discovered at Ras Shamra in northern Syria in 1929, Gordon plunged into this new field and produced numerous studies on the language

and the literature. Generations of biblical scholars learned Ugaritic through Gordon's books.

Gordon, however, considered his most significant accomplishment to be his decipherment of Minoan. Sir Arthur Evans had discovered two sets of inscriptions on Crete, one called Linear A dating to the Middle Bronze Age, and another called Linear B dating to the Late Bronze Age. The latter turned out to be the earliest form of the Greek language that we possess. The identity of the Linear A texts, called Minoan, continues to be debated. Gordon read this material as Semitic, based on such obvious lexical items as *kull-* "total." Gordon's view has not convinced many scholars, yet he was absolutely certain about his conclusions. As Gordon fondly stated, "There are two kinds of scholars, those who catch on quickly and those who need more time."

For all his talent and ability, nevertheless it took years for Gordon to land a regular academic position at an American university. Two factors were at work: the Depression of the 1930s which squeezed the budgets of many universities, and lingering antisemitism which continued to block Jews from gaining academic posts. Finally in 1946, at age 38, Gordon secured a regular position. He was called to his unofficial alma mater, Dropsie College, to teach Assyriology and Egyptology. In 1956 he moved to Brandeis University, and in 1973 to New York University, from which he retired in 1989, at age 81.

During these 44 years of teaching, Gordon produced more than 90 doctoral students, of which I am proud to count myself as one. But it is not just the number of students that is remarkable, it is the range of their specialties. Most of his students were in the fields of Bible, Ugaritic, and Akkadian, but he also supervised dissertations on Hittite, Hurrian, Egyptian, Coptic, Aramaic, Syriac, Mandaic, Greek, Arabic, and archaeological subjects.

Gordon's breadth is also well illustrated by recalling the various fields in which he made major contributions. Above I mentioned his work in Ugaritic and Minoan. His earliest work in the 1930s centered on the Nuzi tablets, including biblical parallels to these texts. In 1947 in the journal *Orientalia*, Gordon published eight new Amarna tablets unearthed by the Egyptian Exploration Society during the years 1926–37. The Aramaic magic bowls was an interest that Gordon inherited from his teacher Montgomery: the publication of new bowls would engage Gordon for half a century, from two articles in *Archiv Orientalní* in 1934 through an article in *Orientalia* in 1984. Gordon's first published article was "The Feminine Singulars of the Egyptian Demonstrative Pronouns" in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* for 1929. His doctoral dissertation, in which he focused on the ancient versions and on rabbinic texts, was published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* for 1930 under the title "Rabbinic Exegesis in the Vulgate of Proverbs." In a major article in the journal *Iraq* in 1939, Gordon published a collection of seals from the Walters Art Gallery; he published additional seals from collections in Princeton and Philadelphia in *Orientalia* in 1953. In the late 1940s

and early 1950s Gordon turned his attention to the subject of Aegean interconnections, resulting in a major study called "Homer and Bible" which appeared in *Hebrew Union College Annual* in 1955. And then of course there are dozens of articles on various facets of the Bible spanning seventy years in journals and monographs throughout the world.

Most remarkable of all was Gordon's ability to see connections between the various fields in which he worked, spanning both time and space. Of the many examples that I could cite, I limit myself to two, both the result of Gordon's having turned his attention to the Ebla texts published in the 1970s. One of the prominent deities at Ebla was a god typically called Kura in the secondary literature, though of course the script does not allow the cuneiformist to distinguish between Kura and Qura. A temple to this god stood in Ebla, as the statement in *ARET* 3:29:v:1 makes clear: *in u<sub>4</sub> nam-ku<sub>5</sub> é 'Qu-ra* "on the day of swearing in the temple of Qura." But what happened to this deity? Why do we hear nothing of him after the Ebla texts in the 3rd millennium BCE? In Gordon's words, "Whenever one comes across a major divinity who disappears in the religion of subsequent times, one should look for him in the later magical literature. Sometimes such a god will survive in a debased demonic role" (*Eblaitica* 2 [1990] 130). Gordon, with the Aramaic magic bowls a constant interest of his, noticed that two recently published texts provide the later echo of Qura. In a Jewish amulet published by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, we read of Qurael as the father of a demoness; and in a Syriac incantation text published by Philippe Gignoux we learn that Qura serves as the guarantor of oaths (note the "swearing" in the Ebla document). How many others in the field would be studying both the Ebla cuneiform texts from the 3rd millennium BCE and Aramaic and Syriac magical texts from the 1st millennium CE simultaneously, thus leading to such a discovery? This was truly one of Gordon's extraordinary abilities and most characteristic traits.

Another example of the same procedure may be seen in Gordon's having connected the demon called Ḥabḥaby attested in an Eblaite exorcism with the Ugaritic demon named *hby* and with the still later attested demon חבי of Isa 26:20 = חבין (with suffix) of Hab 3:4 (*ibid.*, p. 128). Again one can only marvel at Gordon's capacity to see such interconnections over broad expanses of time and space.

It was his ability to see interconnections, together with his wide-ranging interests, that led Gordon to explore issues with global perspective. He believed that the Bat Creek inscription found in eastern Tennessee attests to the migration of Jews fleeing the Roman empire in the 2nd century CE; and he believed that the Parahyba inscription from Brazil is authentic and therefore shows that Phoenician sailors reached the New World during the Iron Age. More recently Gordon turned his attention to a Samaritan decalogue text found in New Mexico. In the other direction, Gordon was struck by the ap-

pearance of a 22-symbol writing system in China in 1200 BCE (the earliest Chinese writing, used on the bone oracles), at exactly the time when the shorter Ugaritic alphabet is attested in Beth Shemesh and Mount Tabor. This suggested to him long-range diffusion across Asia. At first blush these connections sound impossible, and Gordon was severely criticized for suggesting them. Only future discoveries can either confirm or deny these contacts, but the following is worth noting: Gordon's early work in Aegean–Near Eastern connections was met with opposition, yet today archaeologists readily acknowledge such contact (regardless of how one views the Linear A texts). Gordon's reading of the Bat Creek inscription was not accepted, yet subsequent tests showed that wood found at the site was from c. 200 CE, and that the metal bracelets found at the site were of a specific type of brass alloy attested elsewhere only in the eastern Mediterranean during the Roman empire. Finally, just as Gordon was beginning to investigate the China–Near East connection, researchers announced the discovery of Chinese silk in a Ramesside period tomb. This does not mean that Egyptians traveled to China or vice versa, but it demonstrates that international trade through stages covered large swaths of land. In short, a pattern emerges here: throughout his career Gordon tackled a variety of long-range diffusion issues, in most cases weighing the evidence positively, always against the scholarly majority, only to have future discoveries bolster his conclusions.

These areas of Gordon's wide-ranging interests gained him a certain notoriety, but the focus of Gordon's work throughout his career was always the Bible. This subject, accordingly, deserves more detailed treatment in this tribute. Gordon's approach to the Bible differed greatly from the methods employed by many or most of his contemporaries. Biblical studies throughout most of the 20th century was dominated by the Documentary Hypothesis, or the JEDP Theory. Gordon saw no evidence for this theory; when he taught the books of the Pentateuch, he simply read the text with his students, not stopping to ponder any pre-history that the text may or may not have had before reaching its final form. Similarly, textual emendation was a common practice among scholars. Gordon, by contrast, never proposed emendations, preferring instead to deal with real texts, difficult though they may be, as opposed to hypothetical texts reconstructed by scholars. In addition, Gordon had little time for secondary literature; in class he hardly ever made reference to another scholar's view. Again, all that mattered to him was the text that lay before him and his students. He emphasized time and again the need to familiarize oneself with the original text.

Furthermore, at a time when there was little interaction between the fields of Classics and Near Eastern studies, Gordon developed an approach that would allow the two disciplines to be integrated. I consider his monograph *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (1965) to be his most engaging book, laying out in clear terms how "Greek and Hebrew

civilizations are parallel structures built upon the same East Mediterranean foundation,” with Ugarit as a major link between them, and with arms reaching to Egypt, Hatti, and Mesopotamia as well. This wonderful—and very readable—volume developed further the material presented in the “Homer and Bible” article; and of course it dovetailed well with his work on the Minoan texts.

In these various ways, Gordon swam against the tide, preferring instead to chart an independent course. Somewhat ironically, but understandably in light of his methods, the one group of scholars most attracted to Gordon were conservative Protestants. Gordon rejected the JEDP Theory and resisted textual emendation not out of any religious conviction, but because of a devotion to the ancient text. It mattered not whether Gordon was teaching the Bible or a Ugaritic or Akkadian composition: the text was sacred and needed to remain the focus of the scholar’s attention. Accordingly, conservative Protestants felt very comfortable studying with Gordon, and they flocked in large numbers to Dropsie and Brandeis, both in essence Jewish institutions. When Gordon spoke some years ago at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., the president of the seminary concluded his introduction as follows, “I present to you Dr. Gordon, who, though not Christian, is through his students a leading figure in conservative Christian Old Testament studies.”

Another aspect of Gordon’s persona that requires mention was his excellence as a teacher. Gordon’s seminars were populated by students with diverse levels of knowledge, ranging from those who were relative newcomers to the study of Hebrew to those who knew the Torah by heart. Yet all learned in the same environment, guided by the master who directed questions and comments to the different students depending on their backgrounds. The eager neophyte could expect Gordon to explain linguistic rules with expert clarity; the veteran student benefited from a linguistic parallel drawn from Arabic or Akkadian. Gordon was especially devoted to his students, he cherished every one of them, and always took pride in their professional accomplishments as they developed into productive scholars.

A survey of Gordon’s life would not be complete without mentioning his work for the United States Army during World War II. Gordon was among a select group of scholars brought together to coordinate efforts in the area of cryptanalysis, cracking coded messages sent by the Axis powers in a variety of languages. He was especially proud of this work, and later noted that the methods he learned proved invaluable in his decipherment of Minoan during the 1950s. In addition to serving stateside as a cryptanalyst, Gordon also spent time with the Persian Gulf Command, allowing him to return to the Near East and to experience life in yet another country, Iran. Ever the scholar, Gordon used his leave time to visit archaeological sites such as the tomb of his namesake, Cyrus the Great, and to track down and publish Aramaic

incantation texts found in museums and private collections. The last time that I saw Professor Gordon, during a visit to his home in August 2000, he proudly wore the medal that he recently had been awarded by the Russian government in gratitude to those American soldiers who had served in Iran facilitating the overland transport of weapons and other essentials to the Russian army.

A few other personal details about Gordon's life should be noted. Gordon was able to spend considerable time in the Near East as a young man because he remained single until after World War II. In 1946, at age 38, he married Joan Kendall, and together they had five children. Occasional references to Joan may be found in Gordon's publications, as he fondly acknowledged observations that she made which contributed to his research. Sadly, Joan died of cancer in 1985. Gordon remarried in 1986, this time to Constance Wallace, one of his students at N.Y.U., and a scholar in her own right. Alas, Connie also succumbed to cancer, passing away a few months after Cyrus, on July 20, 2001. Incidentally, both of Gordon's wives were artistically oriented: Joan was an accomplished painter, while Connie was a concert cellist. Gordon appreciated the arts greatly, and his marriages allowed him continual contact with these facets of human endeavor.

As I stated at the outset, the field of biblical studies not only has lost a giant, it has lost the last link to a distant past. Never again will biblical scholars be able to experience the kind of life that Cyrus Gordon experienced and emblemized. The breadth and depth of his knowledge; the ability to explain both seal impressions and a stray *dagesh* in the text of the Hebrew Bible; facility in speaking modern Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian, combined with expertise in all the classical languages; at home both in secluded villages in northern Iraq and in the halls of Western academe: these combinations in one individual will not be seen again.

Cyrus Gordon died the day after receiving the National Jewish Book Award for *A Scholar's Odyssey* in the autobiography/memoir category for the year 2000. His life was complete. He died at home surrounded by his loving wife Connie and his five children. At the funeral, Gordon's former student from the Dropsie days, David Nieman (retired from Boston College) said it best in his eulogy: "Cyrus had enough achievements in one lifetime for three or four lifetimes." יהי זכרונו לברכה "May his memory be for a blessing."