

Cyrus H. Gordon, 1908–2001

Maverick Scholar Mastered Many Fields

By Gary A. Rendsburg



Cyrus H. Gordon, a giant in Biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies, died on March 30, 2001, at the age of 92, at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts. With his 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 1920s and 1930s, when academic *nephilim* (giants) walked the earth and when major discoveries were revolutionizing Biblical studies.^b

Gordon became involved in the field at a very young age: He published his first article at 21, and first visited the Near East at 23. Because of this early start, Gordon knew many of the luminaries of the 20th century, including the archaeologists Sir Flinders Petrie and Sir Leonard Woolley. Gordon was recently describing his early fieldwork to a young archaeologist when the young man said with amazement, “You worked with Woolley at Ur and you’re still alive?”

Between 1931 and 1935, Gordon lived in Iraq, in small villages among Arabs, Kurds, Yezidis, Mandeans, and Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians. But he also dug with William F. Albright at Tell Beit Mirsim, and accompanied Nelson Glueck on his exploration of Transjordan. Gordon constantly peppered his classes and his publications with firsthand observations of the Near East gained during those years.

Gordon loved to talk about his life. His autobiography, *A Scholar’s Odyssey*, was published last year by the Society of Biblical Literature and won a National Jewish Book award.

Born in Philadelphia on June 29, 1908, Gordon soon showed a strong proclivity for languages; during his teens he mastered not only Hebrew but also Aramaic, Latin and German. Gordon received his B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Pennsylvania.

Scholars consider Gordon’s most important contribution to be his books on Ugaritic, beginning with his *Ugaritic Grammar* (1940) and culminating with his *Ugaritic Textbook* (1965). Generations of Biblical scholars learned Ugaritic through Gordon’s books.

Gordon himself, however, considered his most significant accomplishment to be his decipherment of Minoan. Sir Arthur Evans had discovered two sets of inscriptions on Crete, now called Linear A and Linear B. The latter is the earliest form of Greek that we know; Gordon believed Linear A to be Semitic, though he failed to convince many of his colleagues.

Gordon taught at Dropsie College, in Philadelphia, at Brandeis University and at New York University, from which he retired in 1989 at age 81. During 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 his students that is remarkable, it is the range of their specialties: Most focused on Bible, Ugaritic and Akkadian, but he also supervised dissertations on Hittite, Hurrian, Egyptian, Coptic, Aramaic, Syriac, Mandaic, Greek and archaeological subjects.

Cyrus Gordon’s life was complete. He died at home surrounded by his loving wife, Connie, and his five children. At the funeral, David Neiman, a former student, said it best: “Cyrus had enough achievements in one lifetime for three or four lifetimes.”