HYAM MACCOBY


European Judaism mourns its most prolific and scholarly contributor with the death of Hyam Maccoby. For many years, he served on the editorial board of European Judaism and contributed important articles of his own as well. As Tony Rudolf pointed out in a note to The Times, he was one of the few scholars who could be approached by anyone in quest of a ruling within Jewish law, and he was also a total authority on Jewish history and on Jewish tradition. In the same way, working in a Franconian village cemetery, Evelyn Friedlander could use her mobile phone to reach Hyam and ask questions on various customs or request a reading on gravestone inscriptions.

At the Leo Baeck College-Centre for Jewish Education Hyam often conducted the Megillah reading on Purim. Eyes gleaming, he would discover the word ‘mishteh’ (party) and would demand that all had to lift their glasses and drink!

Of course, his influence ranged far beyond the college. The obituary in The Independent stated: ‘When Hyam Maccoby approved of Toyah Wilcox for his 1986 television play The Disputation, he clearly added to his reputation as a serious, objective scholar.’ His brilliant study Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages had been published in 1982. The play (later a stage play) presents the encounter in Barcelona in 1263 between Rabbi Moses ben Nachman and Pablo Christiani, a Jewish convert to Christianity, and centres upon the Jewish and Christian understanding of Jesus as the Messiah. Maccoby’s book, never mind the play, was considered as ‘too partisan’ by some critics. In reply, Maccoby noted that ‘scholars who lean over backwards to demonstrate their objectivity fall into the pit of negative partisanship’.

As the stormy petrel of Biblical and post-biblical scholarship, Maccoby could never be accused of this. His books on Jesus and Paul, backed up with the full knowledge of all the sources, were certain to cause controversy. Yet he was one of a school of Jewish experts in New Testament studies, others being Geza Vermes, Samuel Sandmel and Joseph Klausner, all of whom had to be treated with respect. In contrast to his writings, his quiet kindness and concern for others made him an outstanding teacher and colleague, even though
occasional outbursts of temper were part of his character. He always had time for the students and teachers of the Leo Baeck College, in London, where he did much of his work.

Born in 1924 in Sunderland, Maccoby was educated at Bede Grammar School and Balliol College, Oxford, where he initially read Classics, changing to English after war service from 1942 to 1946 in the Royal Signals at Bletchley. Later he received an honorary PhD from the Open University. For much of his teaching life he taught English to sixth-formers, but retired early. This did not prevent him from writing a brilliant analysis of T. S. Eliot’s anti-Semitic outbursts (for Midstream in 1973), which also caused controversy.

When he came to us at the Leo Baeck College, we only had a vacancy for a librarian. Quietly, he turned to new studies, and soon presented himself as a qualified librarian. When we moved to a new building, Maccoby’s work in setting up our library was a notable achievement. Soon, he became an essential member of the teaching staff as well, specialising in the intertestamental period but also teaching rabbinic texts. He was our librarian for 19 years, praised as ‘a formidable teacher’ by the Principal, Professor Jonathan Magonet. After becoming an Emeritus Fellow of the college, he moved to Leeds, where he became a Professor at the Centre for Jewish Studies at Leeds University. The wide range of his role in education is testified by his appointment as an adviser to the Department of Jewish Studies at Shandong University in China. Throughout his teaching life, Maccoby not only published key studies in his fields, but was also active in writing and working for the media, with significant pieces in The Independent and elsewhere. His frequent appearances on television, mainly on talk shows, kept him in the public eye. He was a participant in the 1993 Sorry, Judas production by Howard Jacobson, inspired by Maccoby’s book Judas Iscariot and the Myth of Jewish Evil (1992, awarded the Wingate Prize) but felt betrayed and used by its television editing. He also wrote a searching criticism of Franco Zeffirelli’s 1977 television series Jesus of Nazareth; and his comments on current issues were welcomed both by readers and listeners. There are two areas of Maccoby’s scholarship which enter into the current Jewish-Christian dialogue. His study of Paul, The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity (1986), challenges his Jewish colleagues (notably Sandmel’s The Genius of Paul, 1958) as well as many Christian scholars. In it, Maccoby presents a highly critical view of Paul’s life and teachings, claiming that Pauline Christian theology was created out of a synthesis of mystery religion, gnosticism and Judaism. Maccoby showed that basic teachings of Jesus’s original followers survived the destruction of 70 CE within the Christian Ebionite sect until they disappeared in the fourth century. Maccoby’s Jewish approach to Jesus is summarised in Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the
Hyam Maccoby

Jewish Resistance (1973). There he portrays an environment that makes it totally credible that Jesus, the Pharisee, led a resistance movement against Rome and the Sadducaean priests in the hope of the coming Kingdom of God: he was executed by Pontius Pilate for his actions in which the Romans recognised a ‘King of the Jews’. ‘Jesus’, writes Maccoby, ‘was a good man who fell among Gentiles. That is to say, he fell among those who did not understand that to turn him into a god was to diminish him. He tried to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, and he failed; but the meaning of his life is in the attempt, not in the failure. As a Jew, he fought not against some metaphysical evil but against Rome’. If this is unpalatable to many Christian theologians today, it must be noted that Maccoby here saves the historical structure that cannot be ignored. The wild inaccuracies of Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ live totally within a fundamentalist theology that ignores history. Maccoby’s depiction of Jesus the Jew restores the authenticity of the historical quest, and one must be grateful for this. Shortly before his death, Maccoby completed his last book, to be entitled Antisemitism and Modernity.

Albert H. Friedlander z’l

Note: The Times obituary was in some ways antagonistic, trying to argue against Hyam’s position on Christianity. From internal evidence, one can deduce that the author was a convinced Christian who had felt his faith challenged. Hyam’s widow Cynthia, also a scholar who is now editing his final work on Antisemitism and Modernity, wrote to us (and to The Times) as follows:

‘I thought the Times obit patronising but, much worse, a travesty of Hyam’s views by someone who clearly had never taken the trouble to read Hyam’s books. For example Hyam did not disagree with Vermes over whether Jesus was a Hasid. Hyam entirely agreed that Jesus belonged to the charismatic wing of the Pharisees and had much in common with a figure such as Hanina ben Dosa. However, Hyam did not agree that there was the alleged hostility between the charismatics and the so-called legalistic Pharisees: more of a friendly tension. In The Mythmaker (p. 46) Hyam writes: “Jesus may well have belonged to the Hasidim”. See also Jesus the Pharisee … Hyam’s main disagreement with Vermes was on the question of whether Jesus had political aims. Vermes indeed denies that Jesus claimed to be the messiah which makes it difficult to explain why he ended up on a Roman cross on a charge of claiming to be King of the Jews. Many weird answers have been dreamt up to answer this “conundrum”. It was also quite wrong to say that Hyam had “a deep and unyielding hostility to Christianity”. Hyam was certainly opposed to
the medieval mindset of Christianity, as exemplified in the Gibson film, which Hyam saw as having led to the persecutions and murders of Jews over the centuries in Christian Europe, culminating in the Shoah. But this is not the only form of Christianity and to those Christians who were interested in Jesus’ teachings ...

BEN SEGAL

Born Newcastle, 21 June 1912. Died London, 23 October 2003, aged 91

Professor of Semitic languages at London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) from 1961 to 1979, Ben Segal later brought his formidable academic abilities – allied with qualities of kindness, humility and dignity – to bear on revitalising the Progressive Leo Baeck College.

His honours ranged from the academic to the military: a DPhil from Oxford, where he had attended university; an MA from Cambridge, where he won three scholarships in Oriental languages and the Mason Prize; to the Military Cross in 1942.

His Arab-world expertise led to a Middle East intelligence posting at the start of the Second World War. In 1942, he volunteered for active service. Based in Cairo, he carried out the secret operations behind Rommel’s lines which won him the MC, when a combination of courage and organisational skill led to the capture of Derba in Libya.

He continued in army intelligence from 1942 to 1944 and was a captain in the military administration of Tripolitania in 1945 and 1946. On demobilisation, he married Leah Seidemann, and began teaching at SOAS.

Retiring in 1979, he was invited to Cairo’s Ain Shams University as a lecturer in Aramaic, and was resident fellow at the Hebrew University in 1980.

After an outstanding career, which saw his SOAS department expand its range of languages and scholarship, he joined Leo Baeck College at a crucial time, becoming principal in 1982, and president of both the college and of the Centre for Jewish Education when he stepped down in 1985. He guided the college’s move from Seymour Place in the West End to the Sternberg Centre in Finchley with indispensable sensitivity and insight. He also gave his full wisdom and support to his successor as principal, Jonathan Magonet.

Professor Judah Benzion Segal, always known as Ben, was a wonderful teacher. I recall a moment when we came to his room and he translated
Aramaic incantations inscribed on the funeral bowls which stood on his desk. Suddenly, we saw the true scholar at work.

Fully committed to Progressive Judaism, he served as vice-president of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain from 1985 to 1991 and president of the North Western Reform Synagogue (Alyth Gardens) from 1976 to 2003. His connection with Israel, where his parents settled in the 1920s, led to his vice-presidency of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society.

In addition, he was a member of the Jewish Chronicle Trust from its establishment in 1969 until 1987.


His research on Edessa (now Urfa in south-east Turkey) was published in his definitive *Edessa: The Blessed City* (1970). Until destroyed by Crusaders in 1146, it was a pilgrim destination as the first city to accept Christianity, and was the birthplace of classical Syriac literature. His research uncovered six previously unknown mosaics through which he established the history of that ‘lost city’. He was honoured with the Freedom of the City of Urfa in 1973.

He is survived by his wife, Leah, two daughters, Naomi and Miriam, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Albert H. Friedlander z’l