In Memoriam Geza Vermes

**JJS Editor 1971–2013**

The numerous appreciative obituaries of Geza Vermes published all over the world in the weeks after his death in May have demonstrated the remarkable impact of his scholarship on a wide public. Much has been written about his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish Bible interpretation, and the Jewish environment of Jesus and early Christianity. The obituaries showed that in his rich and variegated career there were many Gezas. But none of them has emphasized as much as it deserves the centrality in that life of the editing of the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, to which he devoted himself for over 40 years, and it is appropriate to say something more about this here.

Geza was born in Makó in southern Hungary in 1924. His father, Ernő, a journalist, and his mother, Terézia, a schoolteacher, were part of the largely assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie in Hungary, and he was brought up in an educated, intellectual atmosphere in which religion, and indeed Jewish identity, played little part beyond the entry ‘Israelite’ on his birth certificate. Hungarian was the language spoken at home and many family friends were not Jews, and when he was six, in the late spring of 1931, he and his parents converted to Christianity. Sent to the local gymnasium, he proved a precocious student and, to gain entry into further education by the only means possible for him, decided in his late teens to study for the priesthood. The decision almost certainly saved his life in the terrible years that followed. The seminary priests protected him during the period of the mass deportation of Hungarian Jews in 1944. He was quietly affected by the trauma of his time in hiding, and his parents were killed, but he survived the war physically unscathed.

In 1946 Geza applied to the order of the Fathers of Notre-Dame de Sion, which had been founded by two French Jewish converts, the brothers
Ratisbonne. In 1947 he was sent by the order to Louvain to study Theology and Oriental history and languages. His intention was to write a thesis on Isaiah, but when in 1948 news reached Louvain of the discovery two years earlier of biblical and other ancient Jewish writings in the Judaean desert, he changed his topic. His thesis on the origins of the Dead Sea sect, completed in 1952, was the first doctoral thesis to be written on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Offered a temporary lecturership in Divinity in June 1955 at the University of Newcastle, Geza continued to write extensively on Bible interpretation in antiquity, not least as revealed by the Dead Sea Scrolls, and published with Penguin in 1962 the first edition of *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. In 1965 he was offered the post of Reader in Jewish Studies at Oxford and moved to the house on Boars Hill where he remained for the rest of his life. He became a Fellow of the fledgling Iffley College, which in 1966 was transformed into Wolfson College, with Isaiah Berlin as President. In 1972 he was appointed by the University a Governor of the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies (now the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies), with which he retained close connections, most recently as an Honorary Fellow.

*Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* was published in 1973 and had an immediate impact on public discussion regarding the need to understand Jesus entirely within his Jewish environment. Not least among the other achievements of Geza’s time in post in Oxford was the extensive revision, in collaboration with a small group of colleagues and former students, of Emil Schürer’s *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*. He incorporated seamlessly the new findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls into the framework of this classic work established in the nineteenth century.

Geza was among the first in a humanities faculty in Oxford to seek to attract graduate students by setting up taught Master’s courses in Jewish Studies in the Graeco-Roman Period. As his reputation grew he inspired a good number of devoted doctoral students who went on to academic careers in many parts of the world. Many of them contributed to the two volumes published in his honour (one in 1990, and a special volume of *JJS* published in 1995, to mark 25 years of his editorship of the *Journal*). His teaching was primarily by example – he was eclectic in the methods he allowed his pupils to adopt, and the weekly research seminar he established in 1965 embraced examples of all the different scholarly approaches. When asked to discuss methodologies at a congress of the European Association of Jewish Studies (of
which he was a founding spirit, as he had been for the British Association),
he described himself as characteristically British in his willingness to use
any method that works.

After retirement from his university post in 1991, Geza’s output diminished
only briefly, even during the difficult period preceding the death of his first
wife Pam from cancer in 1993. A series of studies sought to clarify his views
on the significance of Jesus within Judaism. In 1987 he had proclaimed the
failure of the editors of the Dead Sea Scrolls to publish their texts in timely
fashion to be the ‘academic scandal par excellence of the twentieth century’.
When he was himself entrusted in 1991 with the editing of the fragments of
the Community Rule from Cave 4, he completed the task, with the assistance
of Philip Alexander, with exemplary speed and accuracy. Among his many
later publications were a series of studies of central elements of the Jesus story
(on the Nativity, Passion and Resurrection) and a history of Christianity from
its origins to the fourth century. Characteristic of these studies is an insistence
on independent readings of the primary evidence, with only rare concern
for the history of scholarly discussion (except that he liked in recent years
to remind contemporary specialists in the Dead Sea Scrolls how often their insights had been prefigured in the early years of Qumran research, which he was now one of the few remaining scholars able to recall at first hand).

Geza was awarded a D.Litt. by Oxford in 1988 and was appointed to a personal chair in Jewish Studies in 1989. In 1985 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and in 2001 he was elected to the European Academy of Arts, Sciences and Humanities. He received honorary degrees from Durham, Edinburgh, Sheffield and the Central European University of Budapest, and in 2009 he was honoured by the United States House of Representatives with a vote of congratulation ‘for inspiring and educating the world’. The latest edition of the translated Dead Sea Scrolls, now entitled *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, was issued, fifty years after the first edition, as a Penguin Classic.

In all this varied career, the *Journal* was a constant. Geza was appointed editor by the *Journal*’s owners, Jewish Chronicle Publications, in 1971 following a difficult period in the fortunes of the *Journal* after the premature death of its previous editor, Joseph Weiss (also originally from Hungary), an expert on Hasidism who was teaching at University College London. The owners gave Geza full editorial freedom to develop the *Journal* as he wished, an independence he retained when ownership was transferred to the newly founded Oxford Centre in 1976. Geza immediately brought order and efficiency to the editing process, and it was a cause of quiet satisfaction that throughout his editorship the *Journal* never failed to be published on time. The *Journal*, which was founded in 1949, had already begun in the 1960s to shift from biblical to later topics, but Geza’s interests in late antiquity inevitably shaped its character, with many important articles on rabbinics, targum and Bible interpretation. For a while, in the early 1990s, Geza enshrined his campaign to bring to scholarly attention the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls by setting aside a Qumran Corner. All this was achieved single-handed for 25 years, apart from a few years set aside for single volumes under joint editorship on special occasions or on special topics. As senior editor from 1996, with a series of colleagues, Geza remained intimately involved with the direction of the *Journal* to the end.

For many years production of the *Journal* was something of a cottage industry on Boars Hill, with Pam both presiding over the administration of correspondence and sales and advising on English style, while Geza vetted,
corrected and solicited articles and reviews, checked proofs (which in his first entry in *Who’s Who* he inserted as a hobby), shaped what he called the batting order of the contents of each volume, and negotiated the typesetting (which, because of the use of Hebrew and Greek fonts, was in the early days quite complex). He had a remarkable editorial instinct for significant work even in areas far outside his own expertise. His rapid evaluation of articles, so that contributors knew that they could rely on early publication if their work was accepted by *JJS*, was a major reason for his success in attracting submissions of the highest quality from around the world. His principle of selection was the clarity, freshness and interest of the work rather than its proven correctness, and he was quite happy if an article provoked a response in a succeeding issue.

Over the years Geza’s devotion to the *Journal* became very personal. He took great pride in the growth of its operations, with his second wife Margaret taking over the role of managing its distribution and financial health. The continuing success of *JJS* will be an enduring part of the legacy of a remarkable life.

**Martin Goodman**  
*JJS* Editor 1995–99

Although I had known Geza since my student years, not least as an examiner of my doctoral thesis, it was only when I became co-editor of the *Journal of Jewish Studies* that I came to appreciate his remarkable qualities as a senior academic colleague and friend. Geza was wonderful to work with. His soundness of judgement in all matters— not only academic and editorial but also in the administration, production and marketing of the *Journal*— was exemplary. In spite of his penchant for early Judaism, Geza was firmly committed to covering in the *Journal* all periods and aspects of Jewish culture and history. He was keen to attract contributions from world-class scholars, but was also very supportive of young writers— Geza was proud to point out that many great scholars had published their first articles in the *JJS*. It is his remarkable personality that has given the *JJS* its excellent reputation as a leading journal in the field. We will endeavour to take *JJS* forward as when Geza was at the helm.

**Sacha Stern**  
*JJS* Editor 2004 to date