

Nahum M. Sarna

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By Marc Zvi Brettler, Brandeis University.

What follows is comprised of two parts: my article on “Nahum Sarna” to appear in the revised edition of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, and the eulogy I offered (along with his rabbi, his two sons, and his two former students: Michael Fishbane of University of Chicago, and Lawrence Schiffman of New York University).

From *Encyclopaedia Judaica*:

Born in London in 1923, Sarna received his training in rabbinics at Jews College, London, and his B.A. and M.A. from the University College London (1946–1949). After living in Israel for two years, he settled in the United States in 1951, and received his Ph.D. in biblical studies and Semitic languages from Dropsie College, Philadelphia. He taught at Gratz College in Philadelphia from 1951 to 1957 when he was appointed librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary and member of its faculty. In 1965 he joined the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University. Sarna was a translator for the *Kethuvim* (Writings) new Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible and the general editor of its Bible Commentary Project, and, after retiring from Brandeis University in 1985, academic consultant for *Judaica*. He was a departmental editor of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* for Bible—the period of the Pentateuch, the Desert, Joshua and Judges—and also contributed major articles to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica*, the *Encyclopaedia Biblica Hebraica*, the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, and the *Oxford Companion to*

the Bible. He has written over 100 scholarly articles, some of which were collected in *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*. One of the major thrusts of his work has been to make the Bible and biblical scholarship available to the broad Jewish community. For example, his *Understanding Genesis* (1966) has served as a general introduction to the Bible. This was followed by *Exploring Exodus* (1986) and his *Commentary on Genesis* (1989) and *Commentary on Exodus* (1991), and *Songs of the Heart: An Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (1993), a study of selected psalms

Sarna's range was extraordinary—as a student of Cyrus Gordon, he was acquainted with the major Semitic languages of the ancient world, as a student of Isidore Epstein and Arthur Marmorstein, he had mastered rabbinic and classical medieval Jewish texts, and as a product of the British university system, he had a strong classical training and was attuned to the literary merit of texts. He was extremely close to the Israeli Bible establishment, and was deeply influenced by Kaufmann's magisterial *History of Israelite Religion*. But he was more interested in interpreting texts and less interested in history of religion than Kaufmann. In his work, Sarna rarely cited the documentary hypothesis, and often highlighted the moral values of the biblical text and the meaning of the final form of the text. His training allowed him to develop the idea of inner-biblical interpretation, namely the manner in which late biblical texts are rabbinic-like in how they interpret earlier biblical texts; this method was further developed by his students, especially Michael Fishbane. Sarna, with his deep understanding of rabbinic texts, also wrote several articles that explored medieval Jewish biblical interpretation and its value for modern biblical scholars, and he offered special insight into the process of canonization, discussed in several difficult and enigmatic rabbinic texts.

Sarna taught in a variety of institutions for sixty years. During much of his career, there were very few institutions that offered the Ph.D. in biblical studies, and even fewer where Jews,

especially those interested in both critical and classical Jewish study, felt comfortable. Therefore, Sarna played a major role in training a generation of American Jewish Bible scholars, and interested many more in the serious study of biblical texts. He was a masterful teacher, engaging, witty, and demanding.

For additional information, see:

Jeffrey. H. Tigay, “Preface” to Nahum M. Sarna, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (JPS Scholars of Distinction Series; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), ix-xx; Marc Brettler, “Sarna, Nahum,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville, Abingdon, 1999), 438-9; Michael Fishbane and Marc Brettler, “Preface” to *Minhah l-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday*, ed. Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane (JSOTSup 154; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 9-11.

Eulogy from service at Brandeis University, June 24, 2005:

I came to Brandeis as a likely economics major in September 1975. I was looking for a course to take; having read *Understanding Genesis* in high school, I knew Professor Sarna’s name. He was teaching Psalms – תילים – as he so loved to call it – and as a scared freshman, I enrolled. I discovered that the Bible could be interesting; my career as an economist was over, and my life was altered forever.

It is difficult to believe that Nahum did not always want to be a biblical scholar. In high school, he was especially interested in engineering, but chose Jewish studies since due to anti-

Semitism, there were few opportunities then for Jews in engineering in Great Britain. He was a language wiz from a young age: he taught himself Latin for the admission exam for University College, and memorized *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, much to the chagrin of some of his teachers, whom he corrected. He had hoped to continue for a Ph.D. in rabbinics, but his intended teacher, Arthur Marmorstein, died. In 1949, Nahum moved to the fledgling state of Israel, but there was nowhere for him to study, as the Hebrew University, formerly on Mount Scopus, was cut off from West Jerusalem, and was in disarray. It was only as a result of a chance meeting in Jerusalem with the President of Dropsie College, that Nahum came to Philadelphia for his PhD in biblical studies and Semitic languages. Thus biblical studies was really his third choice of career.

Nahum was not an ivory tower scholar. He loved interacting with students and scholars, and especially with the members, old and young, of the synagogue Sha'arei Tefillah in Newton. He never lost his love of rabbinics; a picture of the late Saul Lieberman, whom Nahum knew from his years at Jewish Theological Seminary, adorned Nahum's study at home. In 1965 Nahum joined the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis University, where he taught for two decades, raising a generation of students, who had the pleasure of taking what we lovingly called "a Sarna course." Beginning in the mid-1970s, Nahum became especially close to the late Marvin Fox, professor of Jewish thought at Brandeis. They were like brothers, teasing each other mercilessly—I remember moving to Boston 19 years ago with a dog named Marvin, and I can recall Nahum calling Marvin Fox over, and saying with much glee: "Marvin—come meet your namesake." As you see from the crowd today, he befriended many people, including children. My family recalls fondly one Shabbat lunch when Nahum tried to convince our two year old daughter that the D on her placemat did not stand for "doll," but for Deuteronomy, and that P did not stand for a "pear" but for Paraleipomena, the Greek name of Chronicles or דברי הימים. How he loved hearing the words

Deuteronomy and Paraleipomena “out of the mouth of a babe,” מִפִּי עוֹלָלִים וְיִנְקִים, to quote one of his favorite psalms.

Though self-effacing, Nahum was recognized as a leading scholar of the Hebrew Bible. He wrote many scholarly articles, and was one of the few in his generation who popularized biblical scholarship to the Jewish community through such works as *Understanding Genesis* and *Songs of the Heart*. His labor of love was translating *Kethuvim* (Writings) for the Jewish Publication Society along with the late Jonas Greenfield, Moshe Greenberg, and others. Nahum once told me how much he especially enjoyed this multi-year project for the intellectual stimulation it offered. When he taught Psalms in class, and the class disagreed with the Jewish Publication Society translation, he always said to us with a chuckle: “oh yes—I agree with you, but I was outvoted on that verse by Jonas and Moshe.” The value of these popular works in an era when few such books were available cannot be underestimated; they imparted the very best of scholarship in a clear, engaging fashion.

Nahum’s range was extraordinary—as a student of Cyrus Gordon, he was acquainted with the major Semitic languages, as a student of Isidore Epstein and others, he had mastered rabbinic and classical medieval Jewish texts, and as a product of the British educational system, he had a strong classical training and was attuned to the literary merit of texts—in fact, he memorized much British poetry. He loved to interpret biblical texts—especially Genesis, Exodus, Psalms, Job, and the prophets—and to show their literary beauty and moral value; in fact he loved Hebrew texts of all kinds. Through his articles and books, and his teaching, Nahum played a major role in training several generations of Bible scholars, and interested many more in the serious study of biblical texts. He was a masterful teacher, engaging, witty, and demanding.

I learned to teach from Nahum, and his witticisms and exacting standards have stayed with me. He loved to pun, pointing out, for example, that Nehemiah was one of the shortest people in the

Bible (Knee high Miah)—the other was Job’s friend, Bildad the Shuhite (=shoe height). Let me share just two anecdotes to give you a sense of Nahum, and the relative importance of different aspects of his scholarly life.

In preparing to help write the introduction to the Sarna Festschrift, I asked Nahum which of his accomplishments he was most proud of. He did not mention his honorary degrees, or his books, or his articles, or his numerous awards, but said—“that I never came to class unprepared.” This line has become for me as a sort of *shiviti* or mantra, standing before me each time I contemplate walking into a classroom.

The second anecdote could be taken from almost any class that Nahum taught. At least once a week, he would read from one of his index cards: “On such and such a date, when I taught this passage, Mr. or Ms. So and So (a former student) suggested that this verse or word should be interpreted in the following way.” This is, in retrospect remarkable—he did this way before it was fashionable to think that we as faculty can learn from students. Nahum never followed fashions or fads, but was punctilious about giving other people credit; when pressed, he said that he meant to illustrate the rabbinic dictum, based on a verse in Esther: כל האומר דבר בשם אמונו מביא גאולה לעולם —“anyone who cites a tradition in the name of its originator, brings redemption to the world.” Nahum thus brought much redemption to the world.

I first met Nahum almost 30 years ago; I last saw him 2 weeks ago. He was in pain, frail, and could hardly speak—but when he recognized me, he smiled from ear to ear. Though Nahum loved to laugh and smile, I had never seen such a grin before. I spent a lot of time yesterday thinking about that smile and its meaning, and I think it represents, in part, Nahum’s satisfaction with all that he had accomplished, and the knowledge that he had raised several generations of students who will continue his legacy. This legacy is not expressed through a “Sarna school of

biblical interpretation,” for Nahum allowed, even encouraged his students to disagree with his views, as long as they did not become what he called “psychoceramics”—crack-pots. His legacy is expressed through a deep and abiding sense of the Bible’s beauty and value, which he conveyed to us, and we try to pass on to others.

For all of us—but especially for his wife Helen, his children David and Rachel, Jonathan and Ruth, his sister Aviva, and the grandchildren—there is nothing I can say that can express the magnitude of this loss. Nahum lived his life following the words of the first Psalm—

בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה חִפְּצוֹ וּבְתוֹרָתוֹ יִהְיֶה יוֹמָם וּלְלַיְלָה, “the teaching of the LORD was his delight, and

he studied that teaching day and night.” I remember from Psalms class 30 years ago that Nahum

pointed out that this blessed, righteous individual is compared to an עֵץ שְׂתוּלָה, which he insisted

meant not merely a tree “planted,” which in biblical Hebrew would be נִטָּע, but a deeply rooted tree.

Nahum was that stable tree, offering פְּרִי (his fruit), his teaching, to me and to us, and to many in

the future, who will benefit from his written and oral Torah. יהי זכרו ברוך. May his memory be a

blessing.