

Tribute to Professor Sara Japhet

Professor Sara Japhet, Yehezkel Kaufmann Professor emerita of the Bible department at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a giant in the field of Hebrew Bible, died at age 89 on March 27, 2024. By separating Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah and taking the Chronicler seriously as a historian and theologian, Prof. Japhet launched a new chapter in post-exilic studies. Given the new recognition of the importance of that era for the formation of the Bible as a whole, her work revolutionized the field, beginning with her dissertation on Chronicles (1973, published in Hebrew in 1977; English translation in 1989, reprinted in 2009). A leading authority on post-exilic biblical literature, she completed a new Hebrew commentary on Chronicles shortly before her death. Her expertise extended to other areas, including biblical law.

Prof. Japhet's study of medieval Jewish *parshanut* (exegesis) was an integral part of her biblical scholarship. Her editions and studies of Rashi's grandson, Rashbam and the anonymous *pshat* commentary on The Song of Song are especially noteworthy. Like her studies of post-exilic texts, here too she brought neglected texts from the periphery to the center.

A formidable scholar, her laser-sharp mind and commitment to the best scholarly practices ensured that whatever she published was substantive, precise, carefully argued, free of extraneous ideological preferences, elegantly stated, and crystal-clear. Her commentaries and studies will thus be of lasting value. In 1995, the SBL honored her with a special session about her work at its Annual Meeting. The 2007 bilingual festschrift published in her honor, *Shai le-Sara Japhet: Studies in the Bible, Its Exegesis and Language Presented to Sara Japhet*, includes contributions from 50 major scholars in the many fields that she has helped shape; it reflects the admiration she had garnered.

Born in Mandatory Palestine, Sara Japhet first studied at the Hebrew Teachers' College David Yellin in Jerusalem before enrolling in the Hebrew University. In time, as wife and mother, she continued her studies and in due course became the first on many fronts: the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in Bible at the Hebrew University, the first Israeli-born person to receive a Ph.D. in Bible at the Hebrew University, the first woman to head the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University (1987-1989), and the first woman to head The National Library in Israel

(1997-2001). Only later in her life did she realize that she was indeed a feminist who paved the way for many women to enter into academic biblical studies and other fields in Jewish Studies. She was the recipient of the Israel Prize for Biblical Studies in 2004—the only woman so honored. And only last year, she was awarded the Burkitt Medal in Biblical Studies from the British Academy.

Sara Japhet cared deeply and gave unstintingly to her family, students, colleagues, library workers, and friends—she understood and loved people. She was a person of great integrity and an exemplary teacher. In the classroom she was uncompromisingly demanding but kind, thereby fostering several generations of outstanding and distinguished students. Her office and home were always open, as was her heart. Her capacity for friendship matched her commitment to scholarship and the academy.

In his eulogy for Sara Japhet, Professor Noam Mizrahi of the Hebrew University, who had known her for decades, observes that she approached the Bible with uncompromising commitment to seeking truth, and possessed deep understanding and appreciation of the responsibility this entails. Her former student, Hebrew University Professor Nili Wazana in her eulogy refers to her as, “My teacher, my mother, my mentor, my friend” who was the wisest person she had known, and the one with the greatest integrity. Professor Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, President of SBL, concurs and adds: “Sara Japhet had the extraordinary gift of getting unerringly to the heart of the matter, be it scholarly or personal. She inspired and guided generations. I owe the best in my own work to her friendship, inspiration, and guidance.” SBL Council member, Professor Dalit Rom Shiloni of Tel-Aviv University, further adds, “It was a great privilege to be her student. Over the years I’ve learned to appreciate even more the different levels of her influence on my academic thinking and work, and not least, cherished the ways she combined family life (raising four children and many grandchildren) with such a glorious academic excellence.”

Two eulogies by her students, in Hebrew, may be found [here](#); a brief English interview is [here](#); a link to much of her published work is [here](#). We will miss talking to her, learning from her, and hearing her wonderful laugh. Her memory will surely be a blessing.

Submitted by

Marc Zvi Brettler

Bernice and Morton Lerner Professor of

Jewish Studies

Duke University

Durham, NC 27708

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

President of SBL (2024)

Effie Wise Ochs Professor of Biblical

Literature and History

Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of

Religion

Los Angeles, CA 90025