

JACK CHAMBERS, FRSC

John W. Wevers
1919-2010



Professor John W. Wevers, who died 23 July 2010 at the age of 91, was recognized as “the supreme authority” in Septuagint studies. He arrived at the University of Toronto in 1951 as assistant professor in Oriental Languages and Literatures and was a founding member of the Department of Near Eastern Studies in 1963. Under his leadership as graduate chair and departmental chair from 1972 to 1980, the Department grew in numbers and prestige. He remained an active participant in its affairs long after his retirement in 1985, and continued his monumental publications on the Greek Pentateuch for twenty more years.

John Wevers was born into a Dutch farming family in Baldwin, Wisconsin, USA, on 4 June 1919. After his B.A. at Calvin College in 1940, he pursued degrees in Theology, receiving his Th.B. at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1943 and his doctorate at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1945. His Th.D. thesis, supervised by H.S. Gehman, compares the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the Old Testament Book of Kings. By then, he had discovered his true vocation in Biblical philology, and he studied Arabic, Sanskrit, Akkadian, Aramaic and other languages as a postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University and Dropsie College, Philadelphia.

He taught Semitic languages at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1944 to 1951, rising from lecturer to assistant professor while pursuing his postdoctoral studies. Soon after moving to Toronto in 1951, he became a Canadian citizen, and a very active one. He joined the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies (and in 1990 was elected Life Member). He devoted countless hours in the service of hospitals, eventually chairing the Hospital Councils of Toronto and of Ontario, and serving as president of the Central Hospital Foundation (1980-98). In 1961-62, in one of his more surprising services (a gig, almost), he taught the niceties of English usage three times a week on a CBC radio show called “Let’s Speak English.” He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1976 and he received the Queen’s Jubilee Medal in 1978. He received an Honorary Doctor of Divinity from Knox College, Toronto, in 1973, and Doctor Honoris Causa from Rijksuniversiteit de Leiden, the Netherlands, in 1985.

He was a founding member of the Canadian Linguistic Association in 1954, and edited the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* for seven years starting in 1960. He was an influential member of a consortium of Toronto colleagues who lobbied for Linguistics at the University. In 1967, they succeeded in instituting the Centre for Linguistic Studies (now the Department of Linguistics). He served as Acting Director of the Centre in 1970-71, when the first Director was ousted by recently-appointed faculty members. John Wevers’s mandate as Acting Director was to restore calm, a task for which his no-nonsense Calvinist efficiency equipped him perfectly.

His academic heart was always in Near Eastern Studies (now the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations). He had an authoritative presence, erect and upright in body and mind, with a wry smile that made only a mild impression on his solemnity. He expected high seriousness from his students and they knew it. Under ordinary circumstances, so did his colleagues. He liked to tell the story about a meeting he arranged with the Dean when his request for new faculty was turned down. The Dean, attempting to mollify him, said, "John, how do you think it looks when your department already has *two* Pentateuch scholars?" John said, "Why, it looks like we are a world-class university."

His scholarly labours resulted in monumental concordance editions of the Greek Pentateuch beginning with Genesis (1973) and carrying on through Deuteronomy (1977), Numbers (1982), Leviticus (1986) and Exodus (1991), the five books constituting his masterwork *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*. Accompanying these volumes were volumes on text histories, notes and annotations that were often as weighty. *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (1991), for example, is a 678-page commentary on the 474-page *Septuaginta* text. In all, John Wevers produced about 20 books. Besides these, there were dozens of articles derived from his textual scholarship, on such topics as “the earliest witness to Jewish exodus,” “ecstatic vs literary prophets in ancient Israel” and “the building of the Tabernacle.” One of his articles offers “some post-partum reflections” on completing the *Septuaginta* after a quarter-century in labour.

John Wevers’s scholarly output amounts to an extraordinary legacy. His peer, Saul Levin, reviewing Wevers’s *Notes on the Greek Text of Numbers* (1998), wrote: "The eminent J. W. Wevers has given us the ripest fruit of his unequalled scholarship. The greater part of his career has been devoted to the Pentateuch in Greek; and from the time that his critical edition of Genesis launched the series *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum* he was recognized as the supreme authority. If ever anyone comes along to improve upon Wevers' work, it will only be done by digesting it fully."

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(Author's title given as of the time of writing)