

BEN ZION WACHOLDER

1924-2011

A long-time fellow of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy for Jewish Research, Ben Zion Wacholder passed away in Roslyn Heights, New York on March 29, 2011, at the age of eighty-six. He had been the Solomon B. Freehof Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and a major figure in the study of ancient Jewish history, especially of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Born in Ozarow, Poland, Wacholder studied at the Ohel Torah Yeshivah in Baranovitch in what is today Belarus and was soon recognized as a brilliant Talmud scholar. His life took a sharp turn when the Nazis destroyed his town in October 1942, forcing Wacholder to seek survival under a false identity. Living under an invented name and disguising his Jewishness, he worked in a Polish labor camp and hid in forests until liberation. He then moved to Paris, to Bogota, Columbia, and finally to New York in 1947, where he received rabbinical ordination and a B.A. in English literature from Yeshiva University. He went on to graduate studies in ancient history at UCLA, where in 1960 he obtained a Ph.D. with a dissertation that became his first published book, *Nicolaus of Damascus* (1962).

He joined the newly established Los Angeles branch of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as a librarian while still a graduate student in 1957 and was soon appointed to its faculty. In 1963 Nelson Glueck asked Wacholder to join the faculty in Cincinnati, where he remained until his retirement.

Although principally teaching courses in Talmud and rabbinic literature, his field of specialization remained the ancient world, exemplified by *Eupolemus: A Study of Judaeo-Greek Literature* (1974) and *Essays on Jewish Chronology and Chronography* (1976). Beginning in the late 1970s, he increasingly concentrated his scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls, producing in 1983 *The Dawn of Qumran: The Sectarian Torah and the Teacher of Righteousness*, in which he argued that the Temple Scroll was intended to be nothing less than a new Torah to replace the Mosaic one at the End of Days. He also published some four dozen articles, mostly devoted to the Scrolls.

Wacholder gained broad international attention when, disturbed by the failure of the committee in charge of the Scrolls to make them public, he, together with a graduate student, Martin Abegg, reconstructed and published the presumptive text of the unpublished material from Cave 4 on the basis of a concordance that indicated the place and context of the words that it listed. The text appeared in fascicles beginning in 1991 as *A Preliminary Edition of the Unpublished Dead Sea Scrolls: The Hebrew and Aramaic Texts from Cave Four*. The reconstruction proved to be nearly 100 percent accurate and broke the monopoly of the international committee that had kept the text secret for decades.

Wacholder's scholarship, especially late in his career, was nearly always controversial, even as it was serious and stimulated debate. He was rarely satisfied with conventional views, arguing, for example, that the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest mentioned in the Scrolls were not historical but rather eschatological figures who would appear at the End of Days. He attended scholarly conferences regularly, eager to advocate for his theories among his colleagues.

At HUC-JIR Wacholder taught both rabbinical students and Christian graduate students, whose *Doktorvater* he became. He was known as a kind and thoughtful teacher who encouraged students even as he challenged them not to rely on secondary literature or conventional interpretations but to analyze the primary sources first and foremost and to seek their own conclusions. As his eyesight progressively deteriorated, he continued his scholarly work and his teaching, causing students to marvel at how he was able to recite texts that he could not see but could draw upon from the storehouse of his prodigious memory. In 1994 two of his graduate students, John C. Reeves and John Kampen, presented Wacholder with *Pursuing the Text: Studies in Honor of Ben Zion Wacholder on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*. Still in 1996, when he could barely see at all, two students helped him put together his *The New Damascus Document: The Midrash on the Eschatological Torah of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. As late as 2007, he was still able to publish *The New Damascus Document: The Midrash on the Eschatological Torah: Reconstruction, Translation, and Commentary*.

Ben Zion Wacholder was a generous man who never refused a contribution to the poor and who gave freely of his time to anyone who wanted to study with him, often in his own home. Though he taught at a Reform seminary and cherished freedom of thought, he was personally a fully observant Jew. As his eyesight grew worse, he continued to study and write, using a specially adapted computer and the services of students who would read the material to him. Late in life, his cognitive faculties also began to fail, but he could never rest from intellectual endeavor. He was a devoted father and grandfather. Wacholder's first wife, Touby, died in 1990, his second Elizabeth Krukowski in 2004. He lived the last years of his life with his daughter Nina in Roslyn Heights. He is survived by four children and fifteen grandchildren. He was buried, as he wished, in the Land of Israel.

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We thank John Kampen for securing permission to reproduce this obituary, originally posted on the American Academy of Jewish Research website.