



## Tapani Harviainen

\* 1.2.1944 † 28.9.2024

Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages Tapani Harviainen died of a rapidly progressing illness at the age of 80 on 28 September 2024 in Helsinki. He was born in Kuopio on 1 February 1944.

Harviainen graduated from Joensuu Lyceum in 1962 and began his studies in Hebrew, Greek and Latin and theology at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Helsinki in the autumn of the same year. After completing military service and the Reserve Officer School, Harviainen transferred to the Faculty of Arts, where he continued to study Hebrew and other Semitic languages. At the time, the Professor of Oriental Languages was Jussi Aro (1928–1983), who succeeded Aapeli Saarisalo. Harviainen spent the academic year 1970–1971 as an exchange student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he acquired an excellent command of Modern Hebrew. It was during this period that he developed a deep interest in Arabic. His teachers included well-known names in Hebrew linguistics, such as Yehezkel Kutscher, Israel Yeivin, Zeev Ben-Hayyim, and Chaim Rabin.

In 1977, Harviainen defended his doctoral thesis on the vocalism of the closed unstressed syllables in Hebrew. The thesis

shows that the vocalisation of Hebrew in the first centuries of the Common Era differed considerably from the later Tiberian vocalisation. Harviainen was appointed Docent of Semitic Philology in 1977 and was acting professor (part-time) of the discipline from 1983 to 1985, following the sudden death of Jussi Aro, and tenured professor from 1985 until his retirement in 2009.

Harviainen had a broad interest in Semitic languages and left a deep mark on Hebrew and Jewish studies in Finland. Together with Karl-Johan Illman, Harviainen was one of the first scholars in Finland to publish articles and works on Jewish history and culture and on Finnish Jews. At the Faculty of Arts, Harviainen taught not only Biblical Hebrew but also various forms of Aramaic, Rashi's commentaries on the Bible, and Babylonian vocalisation. Harviainen's repertoire of Semitic languages was quite exceptional in Finland. He took a broad view of Semitic languages and cultures, and during his time, the discipline included not only Hebrew and Judaism but also Ethiopian languages, Aramaic, and Canaanite cultures. A number of Semitic languages – Amharic, Ge'ez, Aramaic, Modern Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, and Ugaritic – were offered at least on a periodic basis

during Harviainen's tenure. Even in retirement, the Aramaic and Ugaritic courses taught by Harviainen attracted a large number of students.

Without Harviainen's guidance and willingness to support the multidisciplinary nature of Semitic languages and cultures, the careers of many young researchers would never have got off the ground. Harviainen supervised doctoral theses in various disciplines, with topics ranging from the Jews of Yugoslavia, mysticism in Islam and the Eastern Church, Bedouins in Jordan, Aramaic incantation bowls, the Hebrew poetry of the Karaite Jews, and Yiddish in Helsinki. Even in retirement, Harviainen continued to support young researchers in Finland and abroad.

As a linguist, he will be remembered internationally as an eminent scholar of the history of the Hebrew and Aramaic pronunciation. The study of the historical phonology of Hebrew began with his doctoral thesis, and Harviainen continued working with the theme practically throughout his career. Later on, he became interested in topics such as the Hebrew pronunciation of Lithuanian Karaites and its links to the earlier stages of Hebrew. In terms of Aramaic, Harviainen was above all a scholar of Eastern Aramaic dialects of the first Christian centuries, and published the texts of Aramaic incantation bowls, which are particularly difficult to decipher. In both of his key areas of research, Harviainen built an excellent international network. His versatility as a researcher is also reflected in the fact that he was found qualified for the post of Professor of Old Testament Exegesis in 1984.

Harviainen published extensively on the Lithuanian Karaites, or *Karaims*, in collaboration with Professor Henryk

Jankowski (Poznań), Professor Konstantin Tsereteli (Tbilisi), Mykolas Firkovičius (Vilnius), who revived the Karaim culture, and Olga Vasilyeva, head of the Oriental Manuscripts Sector at the National Library of Russia. In addition to the traditional Hebrew reading tradition or vocalisation of the Karaim, another key area of Harviainen's extensive work was the broader history, identity, and literature of Eastern European Karaites. There are dozens of publications on the Karaites in various languages; the *Festschrift* published in 2004 for Harviainen's 60th birthday lists fifty titles. Harviainen's merits as a researcher in the field were recognised by Lithuania's highest award, the Officer's Cross of the Order for Merits to Lithuania, which was conferred on him by President Valdas Adamkus in 2008.

Harviainen's contribution as Finland's leading expert in Hebrew was particularly valuable during the translation of the Hebrew Bible. He was involved in the work of the Bible Translation Committee throughout the translation process, starting from 1975. In terms of the Hebrew Bible, he left a strong mark on the 1992 Bible translation. Biblical Hebrew also played a significant role in Harviainen's teaching, and he published research that was clearly related to the issues that emerged during the translation process. During his career, Harviainen also published translations of contemporary Hebrew children's literature, Lithuanian Karaite poetry and Ugaritic texts. In 2018, Harviainen and Riikka Tuori translated texts from the Talmud and Mishnah into Finnish. The translations were discussed with Chief Rabbi Simon Livson in the series "Pyhiä juutalaisia kirjoituksia" on Yle Radio 1.

During his career, Harviainen held several positions of trust, including Chair of the Finnish Oriental Society and Head of the Institute for Asian and African languages and cultures. He was also an active partner in the Finnish Institute in Jerusalem, later the Finnish Institute in the Middle East, which was founded in 1994. Harviainen served on the editorial board of the Finnish Journal of Theology from 2000 to 2016. He was elected a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1994.

Harviainen enjoyed travelling and going on expeditions abroad, and his special hobby was isolated islands. In addition to the Middle East, he was interested in Eastern Europe, the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and the history, languages, and cultures of the region. Harviainen's conference visits also allowed his students and colleagues to meet fellow researchers in their fields. Harviainen often visited the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg to study the manuscripts of the famous Abraham Firkovich Collection. He established good relations with the library staff and also introduced his doctoral students and several colleagues to the library's collections during his travels. He also helped catalogue the extensive Hebraica Collection (containing deposit copies of books and newspapers in Hebrew and Yiddish published in the Russian Empire) at

the National Library of Finland. This work has later been continued by several of his students.

After his retirement, Harviainen co-founded Bukovinan perilliset ry (Bukovina Heirs Association), which has regularly organised series of lectures on the minority cultures of Eastern Europe. From 2015 to 2017, Harviainen served as Chair of the association and organised trips for its members to the Baltic States, Poland, and Ukraine. Even outside academia, Harviainen is fondly remembered by many as an excellent and knowledgeable tour guide in the Baltics.

Harviainen was especially devoted to his family, his wife Rea, children Tuomas and Hanna and his grandchildren. By nature, he was calm, thoughtful, helpful and encouraging in many ways to his students. In a seminar held in honour of his 80th birthday in February 2024, Harviainen gave a speech looking back on his varied career and his students. He concluded by reflecting on research into the liturgical traditions of the Arabic language and expressed the hope that young scholars in Finland would be inspired to study the topic. This example is a good illustration of how Harviainen had new scientific possibilities in mind until the very end. Harviainen left behind a completed manuscript of his memoirs.

*Obituary by Hannu Juusola,  
Riikka Tuori and Kaj Öhrnberg*