

**Obituary**

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**In Memoriam Bo L. Isaksson (1947–2025)**<https://doi.org/10.33063/os.v74.1060>

*What does a person gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun?*  
*Ecclesiastes 1*

On the evening of April 21, 2025, Semitist and professor emeritus of Semitic languages Bo Lennart Isaksson passed away in Stockholm after a period of illness.

He is survived by his wife, Greth, and his daughter, Anna. Anna is married to Tord, and together they have two children, Matilda and Arvid. Isaksson found time to spend with his grandchildren, which brought him, Matilda and Arvid much joy.

Isaksson was born on August 12, 1947, in Stockholm, Sweden, and grew up on Roslagsgatan street. His father, Josef Isaksson, was a carpenter and furniture maker, and his mother, Gunvor Isaksson, was a clerk at LM Ericsson. Isaksson spent his early school years at Johannes School and many of his childhood vacations at summer camps on “Barnens Ö” (Children’s Island) a coastal area north of Stockholm, or in Dalarna, Sweden.

Isaksson’s interest in languages began early, and it influenced his choice of program in high school, where he studied languages and mathematics, among other subjects. Anna relates that she once entered her father’s study and found him reading a book in Portuguese whereupon she said: “you don’t know Portuguese!” “That is correct,” her father replied, “but I have a dictionary.”

Isaksson began studying Semitic languages at Uppsala University in the 1970s, under the guidance of the late Professor Frithiof Rundgren, who had established his global reputation through his investigation of the Semitic verb. In *Das althebräische Verbum: Abriss der Aspektlehre* (1961) Rundgren introduced the concept of aspect into both Hebrew and general grammar in an innovative fashion. Early on, Isaksson showed an interest in Hebrew and its verbal system, and later it also proved to be the question that interested him the most. In 1987 Isaksson defended his doctoral dissertation: *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth. With Special Emphasis on the Verbal System*.<sup>1</sup>

In his dissertation, Isaksson examined the language of Qoheleth, especially with regard to the use of the different verb forms. He noted that the suffix conjugation (perfect) is most often used as a narrative tense. The imperfect consecutive, which is common in Biblical Hebrew, occurs only in three places. The infinitive absolute with a subject is found in some places, but the use of participles to express the present tense, which became common in later Hebrew, is not so common. Isaksson concluded that it is difficult to place the language within the developmental history of the Hebrew language. It does not resemble standard Biblical Hebrew, nor does it resemble Mishnaic Hebrew. It most closely resembles the Manual of Discipline from Qumran; however he also suggested that there may be some Phoenician influence.

Isaksson’s bibliography reveals the breadth and depth of his interests, both as an orientalist and a Semitist, and his extensive knowledge of Semitic languages. Besides Hebrew, he conducted research on Ugaritic, Aramaic and Arabic. Starting in the early 1990s, his interest in Arabic grew. He began to focus more on Arabic dialectology and, in 1991, published his first article on the subject: “The per-

<sup>1</sup> In writing this obituary, I received great help from Isaksson’s colleagues; you all have my deepest gratitude.

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sonal markers in the modern Arabic dialects of the Arabian peninsula.” Isaksson’s interest in modern Arabic dialectology motivated him to encourage students to choose to write their BA or MA theses on an Arabic dialect. Until then, only established scholars of Semitic languages had studied Arabic dialectology. Now, students had the opportunity to focus on the subject already at the undergraduate level, which represented a historical change at Uppsala University in particular, and in Sweden more generally. The first MA thesis on Arabic dialectology was written in 1997, and in 2003 the same student defended his doctoral dissertation. It was the first dissertation on Arabic dialectology in Sweden.

Isaksson’s thirst for learning more drove him to conduct many field trips to observe and tape-record different dialects. These trips took him to southeastern Turkey, where he collected material in both Arabic dialects and Turoyo (a Neo-Aramaic dialect), as well as to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen, Ethiopia, and so on. The interactions with local authorities in these regions were not always smooth, and Isaksson’s wisdom and calm demeanor were often needed to escape the grip of the Turkish police, for example. Once, while visiting Arabic-speaking villages in the Siirt region, the police continually tailed Isaksson. When stopping in some villages, he would approach the policemen and offer them cigarettes, even though he did not smoke. Pretending not to know, he would ask them who the original inhabitants of these villages were, to which the police answered: “well, ask them!” This was despite the strict order of the *vali* (governor) not to speak to the villagers!

In September 2005, Uppsala University celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chair of Semitic Languages. Isaksson played a key role in the celebration, helping to organize an anniversary symposium between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of September. This brought together researchers from several countries to discuss recent research in the field of Semitic languages. One of the main objectives of the symposium was to inspire researchers to devise new projects by networking with colleagues in the Nordic countries and other countries around the world. As a part of the anniversary celebrations, the university library, Carolina Rediviva, held an exhibition about the Chair of Semitic Languages titled *Till Österland vill jag fara* (To the Lands of the East I Wish to Travel).

Isaksson’s interest in general linguistics grew stronger over time, and from around 2006, he delved deeper into this discipline and tried to apply his findings to the Hebrew language. In this context, his collaboration with Heléne Kammensjö and Maria Persson on circumstantial qualifiers should be mentioned. As a part of the project, Isaksson edited the anthology *Circumstantial Qualifiers in Semitic: The case of Arabic and Hebrew* (2009). In his contribution, Isaksson compared how the so-called *ḥāl*-expressions are constructed in the two languages and noted similarities and differences. He also compared the meanings and functions of the different verb forms in Hebrew and Arabic.

Isaksson also initiated the Qumran Seminar in Uppsala in 1994. It began as a rather unassuming seminar that, under his leadership, met every other week to study various texts from the caves near the Dead Sea. Over time, it developed into a translation committee that produced a Swedish translation of these texts (*Dödahavsrollarna. Svensk översättning*, 2007).

Isaksson devoted himself in particular to defining the Hebrew language of the Qumran texts. This type of Hebrew occupies a strange intermediate position between Biblical Hebrew and the later Rabbinic Hebrew that we find in the Mishnah. In addition, there are long forms of personal pronouns, *hw*’*h* and *hy*’*h*, as well as verb forms with a preserved stem vowel, *yiqtolū*, instead of biblical *yiqt’lū*. These forms most closely resemble Samaritan Hebrew. Isaksson reminds us that the scribes in the Qumran community did not have access to the Masoretic textual tradition, which was not fully developed until 1,000 years later. His conclusions, published in the *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok 2018*, was that the Qumran community strove to write Biblical Hebrew with Hebrew syntax, but in a manner that corresponded to their own interpretation of the biblical text.

Just months before his passing, and despite his illness, Isaksson’s masterpiece, *The Verb in Classical Hebrew: The Linguistic Reality behind the Consecutive Tenses*, was published. A gigantic work of more than 700 pages, it summarizes much of Isaksson’s previous research on Hebrew verbs. The book

calls on us to abandon the traditional way of looking at Hebrew verbs, and especially the so-called consecutive forms. The traditional view has been that the perfect and imperfect change tense when preceded by a *wə* or a *wa(y)* respectively. In response to this, Isaksson first points out that *wə* and *wa* are the same word. It was only during the time of the Second Temple that the difference in pronunciation was introduced. The original narrative tense is the Proto-Semitic short *yiqtol*. Later, the *qatal* form took over as an alternative to short *yiqtol*. The form *waqatal* was finally introduced to fill a gap in the language and express the continuity clause type. Isaksson concludes that the concept of the consecutive is not needed to describe the grammar of Classical Biblical Hebrew.

As a colleague, supervisor, and professor, Isaksson was a steady source of support and inspiration. He fostered spaces of trust and growth, where his students and colleagues alike felt encouraged and empowered. His Ph.D. students, of which I was one, always knew they had his full attention and care. They never felt alone or neglected, but rather were met with warmth, patience, and genuine engagement. Isaksson has been described as an inspiring leader for both teachers and researchers in the Semitic Collegium at Uppsala University. His ability to organize activities in the Section of Semitic Languages while encouraging lecturers and researchers to advance has contributed significantly to the wide spectrum of subjects taught and studied during his tenure as professor of Semitic languages (2000–2014). *Everyone should do what they are best at*, was Isaksson's approach to his colleagues in the Semitic Collegium. He urged them to share their specialist knowledge with the students while developing as educators and researchers. He also encouraged them to take bold steps into new research fields, and had the ability to assess research proposals, even those outside his own specialty.

Isaksson guided his colleagues to develop pedagogically. His own proposals for the structure of courses exemplified his thoroughness; he always provided clear reading instructions in the reading schedule and syllabus.

An example of Isaksson's creative leadership is how he solved the problem of a sudden gap that arose in the Arabic teaching staff. One late summer day in August, 2007, shortly before the start of the fall semester, Isaksson was in a quandary about how to find a substitute teacher for the new, on-line distance-learning course in elementary Arabic. He swiftly signed himself and the Arabic lecturer up for a class in how to use the internet-based pedagogical environment, and together they managed to teach the Arabic course successfully. Today, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–2022, online teaching is commonplace. But in 2007 it was something quite new; in fact it was the first time a full course in Arabic had ever been taught online at Uppsala University.

Isaksson was more than just a brilliant researcher. He was a lifelong learner who constantly sought to refine his thinking and expand the boundaries of his knowledge, not only as a scholar, but also as an educator, mentor, and leader. His legacy lives on in his scholarship, his students, and the academic community he helped shape through his generosity and vision. He will be remembered not only for the depth of his intellect, but also for as the kindness, humility, and dedication that defined his life and work.

In summary, Professor Bo Isaksson taught us a great deal about how both research and pedagogy require in-depth knowledge, thoughtfulness, clarity, and systematic presentation in order to reach new heights.

*Moryo našwe-le l-malkuṭo da-šmayo*