

John William Wevers (1919–2010):  
A Biographical Note

ALBERT PIETERSMA AND PETER J. GENTRY

John William Wevers was born in Baldwin, Wisconsin, on June 4, 1919, the eldest child of Ben (Bernard) and Minnie (Wilemina) (née Te Grootenhuis) Wevers. Although John graduated from the local high school at age sixteen, he only managed to escape the family farm the next year, after demonstrating to his father's satisfaction, that, as farmer, he would probably end up going "bankroet."

Upon graduating from Calvin College (B.A. 1940), where he exhibited a special aptitude for the Classics, and Calvin Theological Seminary (Th.B. 1943), in Grand Rapids, Michigan, John Wevers proceeded to Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University. At Princeton Seminary he soon came under the influence of Professor Henry Snyder Gehman, who introduced him to what was to be the center of his scholarly interests: the Septuagint, "Egypt's greatest gift to Western civilization" as Wevers himself affectionately called it. A second formative role in John Wevers' development as a scholar was played by James A. Montgomery, whom he always fondly remembered as his academic grandfather.

During his student days at Princeton, John Wevers was a Teaching Fellow (1944–46) in the Department of Biblical Languages. Upon attaining his Th.D. in 1945 he was offered a full-time appointment at the Seminary in Old Testament and Semitic Languages. However, while holding this full-time position, he pursued post-doctoral studies at Princeton University (1945–47) in Arabic, Islamic History, and Indo-European Philology

(Sanskrit). During the next year he studied Akkadian, Aramaic Dialects and Ugaritic at Dropsie College, in Philadelphia, where one of his teachers was Cyrus H. Gordon. Some twenty years later John added Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic to his repertoire of ancient languages.

In 1951, with the rank of Assistant Professor, John Wevers left Princeton, accompanied by his wife Grace (née Brondsema) and the eldest three of his four sons, Bob, Johnny, and Harold (James was born in 1955). He had accepted an invitation by the well-known Orientalist, Theophile J. Meek to join the Department of Oriental Languages (later Near Eastern Studies), University College, University of Toronto. Toronto has remained home for the Wevers family ever since, and it was at the University of Toronto that he earned his international scholarly reputation. In particular, his superb editions of the Greek Pentateuch will clearly outlast many generations of his successors.

During more than half a century of research, teaching, and community service in Toronto, John Wevers' achievements have multiplied and the honors bestowed on him have become numerous. Not all can be mentioned here. In 1954 he spent nine months in the Near East as a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation, studying modern Arabic dialects and modern Islamic movements. From 1960 to 1967 he served as Editor-in-Chief of the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, and was instrumental in establishing Linguistics at the University of Toronto. During 1961–62 he participated as a teacher in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's televised series "Let's Speak English" and in the summers took part in two archaeological campaigns in Jerusalem, at which time he became good friends with Roland de Vaux. In 1966 Wevers was appointed editor for the Septuaginta-Unternehmen of the Akademie der Wissenschaften, Göttingen,

subsequently being elected Corresponding Member of the Akademie, Philologisch-historische Klasse, on January 28, 1972. Later that same year he was elected President of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies (IOSCS) (1972–80) and became Honorary President for life in 1987. Also to be noted is that John William Wevers was one of the founding fathers of the IOSCS, and in fact made the motion to constitute the organization (December 19, 1968). In May of 1973 he received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Knox College, Toronto. In 1976 Wevers was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and two years later, 1978, received the Queen's Jubilee Medal. In 1982, he was named an Ordinary Member of the Accademia Mediterranea delle Scienze, artistic-literary-philosophic class and received, in 1985, an honorary doctorate (Theology) from the University of Leiden. The Distinguished Alumnus Award for 2010, which was bestowed on him by Calvin Theological Seminary shortly before his death, carried a special meaning for him. Until their Princeton years the Wevers family were members of the Christian Reformed Church. Thus the award to him was something of a reconciliation with his ancestral church. In their new home, Toronto, the family joined Rosedale Presbyterian Church, a church John served in numerous capacities, including elder, Clerk of Session, and Chair of the Administrative Council.

On the occasion of his retirement from the University of Toronto, 1984, John was presented with a Festschrift, entitled *De Septuaginta: Studies in honour of John William Wevers on his sixty-fifth birthday* (ed. Albert Pietersma and Claude Cox) Mississauga: Benben Publications. Retirement from the University, however, for John meant more time for his academic pursuits. This period saw the completion of his textual work on the Greek

Pentateuch, with the appearance of the critical edition of *Exodus* in 1991 and its companion volume, *Text History of the Greek Exodus*, in 1992. His five fat volumes of Notes (*Notes on the Greek Text of . . .*) saw the light of day in rapid succession: 1990 (*Exodus*), 1993 (*Genesis*), 1995 (*Deuteronomy*), 1997 (*Leviticus*), and 1998 (*Numbers*). In total he thus contributed fifteen volumes on the Greek Pentateuch, ten on its text and five on its interpretation, in addition to many other publications.

John Wevers' association, in a number of functions, with Toronto's Central Hospital, an institution unique in Canada for its multilingual/multicultural services, dated back to the hospital's beginnings in 1957. For a full thirteen years (1957–70) he was President of the Advisory Board of Governors. Through his connection with Central Hospital, he became involved in the larger field of health care in Ontario, a field which, next to his academic pursuits, remained dear to his heart. In 1977-78 he served as President of the Ontario Hospital Association.

Similarly, his membership in the Toronto Oriental Club began at the Club's inception in 1952, and in 1959–60 he served as its President.

John had a great love for classical music, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in particular. Personally he wrote libretti for "Job: a Musical Drama," "A Psalmic Liturgy," and sixteen anthems for which his son, Harold, composed the music.

Research and teaching, in creative balance, were the hub of Professor Wevers' academic life, and even when University administration placed heavy demands on his time and talents, work on the editions of his beloved Septuaginta never flagged. For the University community in general and for his colleagues in the Department of Near Eastern Studies in particular,

John Wevers served as a standard of dedication to scholarship and the pursuit of excellence.

To a great extent, the measure of the man, John William Wevers, may be gauged from this sketch of his achievements and interests — from his monumental contributions in the field of Septuagint Studies to his love for Scottish country dancing and his less publicized love for the art of wine making; however, only those who were privileged to sit at his feet ever knew Professor Wevers, the gifted teacher, relentless in his demand for excellence, yet, in the words of one of his devoted students, “never harder on his students than he was on himself.”

John Wevers was predeceased by his wife of fifty-nine years, Grace Della Brondsema Wevers, who passed away, after a long illness, in 2001, at the age of eighty-three. John passed away on July 22, 2010, at the age of ninety-one, survived by his four sons and six grandchildren. Posthumously, the IOSCS has named its annual prize in his honor: The John William Wevers Prize in Septuagint Studies.

John William Wevers, scholar, colleague, teacher, and friend, is remembered with the highest esteem, sincere devotion, and abiding gratitude.