



# Tapani Harviainen (1944–2024)

In memoriam

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.152111>

**P**ROFESSOR EMERITUS OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES Tapani Harviainen passed away after a short illness on 28th of September, 2024, in Helsinki, Finland. A dedicated scholar of Semitic languages and cultures, Harviainen left a profound and lasting impact on the development of Hebrew and Jewish studies in Finland.

Harviainen began his studies in Semitic languages at the University of Helsinki in the 1960s, specializing in Biblical Hebrew phonology and Aramaic dialects. He also spent a year studying at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His Ph.D. thesis, completed at the University of Helsinki in 1977, focused on the vocalism of the closed unstressed Hebrew syllables, shedding light on the development of the Hebrew vowel system centuries before the Tiberian Masoretes. After the death of Professor Jussi Aro in 1983, Harviainen was appointed Professor at the University of Helsinki in 1985, a position he held until his retirement in 2009.

Harviainen was among the first Finnish scholars to promote Jewish studies in Finland and to pay attention to the history of the local Jewish community. Beginning in the 1980s, Harviainen published articles on the history of the Finnish Jews, including ‘Drag ur

den finländska judenhetens historia’ (*Nordisk Judaistik* 6:2, 1985) and ‘The Jews in Finland and World War II’ (*Nordisk Judaistik* 21, 2000). Working closely with Professor Karl-Johan Illman from Åbo Akademi University, the two scholars introduced Judaism and Jewish cultures to Finnish readers in both Finnish and Swedish, for example in their *Juutalaisten historia/Judisk historia* (‘The History of the Jews’, Gaudeamus, 1989). Their edited volume for the general public on Jewish culture (*Juutalainen kulttuuri*, Otava, 1998) remains one of the few accessible sources on Judaism written in Finnish.

Harviainen was also internationally known as the leading specialist in Lithuanian Karaite history. His publications on the history, identity, and literature of Eastern European Karaites are available in several languages, with more than fifty titles listed in the *Festschrift* published in 2004 for his sixtieth birthday. For the groundbreaking 2003 volume *Karaite Judaism*, published by Brill, Harviainen wrote three articles on the history of Eastern European Karaites. The Turkic language spoken by Karaites is closely related to Tatar, and Harviainen maintained close contact with Scandinavian and Baltic scholars of Karaite and Turkic linguistics, including those at Uppsala University.

Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Additionally, Harviainen served as the head of Turkology at the University of Helsinki.

As the professor of Semitic languages at the University of Helsinki, Harviainen was in charge of an impressive array of languages and cultures. He approached the field with an open mind, greatly benefiting his students and their wide interests. During his tenure, the Semitic languages taught in Helsinki encompassed not only Hebrew but also Ethiopian and Aramaic languages. His courses on Syriac, Biblical Aramaic, Rashi's commentaries, Jewish Babylonian vocalization, and the sixteenth-century halakhic opus *Shulhan Arukh* were popular also due to his friendly and approachable style of teaching. As a supervisor, Harviainen was exceptionally open to students from different fields of Jewish and Semitic studies and continued to support young scholars even after his retirement. During his professorship, he supervised dissertations in various disciplines within Jewish history and Semitic linguistics, including topics such as the Jews of Yugoslavia, Aramaic incantation bowls, Karaite Hebrew poetry, and Yiddish in Helsinki.

The societal impact of Harviainen's work was felt on many levels and continues to resonate among the Finnish public. Harviainen worked for decades with the official modern Finnish translation of the Bible, published in 1992. He also translated rabbinic texts into Finnish (together with Riikka Tuori, 2018).

Harviainen enjoyed travelling and conducting research trips abroad. One of his favourite destinations was the Saltykov-Shchedrin Russian National Library in St Petersburg with its magnificent manuscript collections, including the well-known Abraham Firkovich collection. Harviainen established good contacts with the library staff and also introduced his doctoral students to the library's collections during his travels. In 2004, Harviainen participated with his Finnish colleagues in a congress for librarians from former Soviet



Church and Judaism working group (Evangelical Church of Finland) in Budapest, 2009. Photo: Anu Antikainen

republics in Sudak, Crimea, where he presented the extensive Hebraica Collection of the National Library of Finland. Harviainen played an important role in cataloguing the collection over the years. After his retirement, Harviainen co-founded the Bukovinan perilliset ry (Bukovina Heirs Association), which has regularly organized series of lectures on the minority cultures of Eastern Europe. From 2010 to 2017, Harviainen served as President of the association and organized trips for its members to the Baltic States, Poland, and Ukraine to explore Jewish and Karaite history and culture.

Above all, Tapani Harviainen was devoted to his family and cherished spending time with his wife Rea, their children, and grandchildren. His colleagues from Finland and abroad will always remember him as a lively discussant with a keen sense of humour and an eye for detail. He will be deeply missed by his friends, colleagues, and students. ■

RIIKKA TUORI AND SIMO MUIR

## Sources

- Juusola, Hannu, Juha Laulainen & Heikki Palva (eds.). 2004. *Verbum et Calamus: Semitic and Related Studies in Honour of the Sixtieth Birthday of Professor Tapani Harviainen*. Studia Orientalia 99 (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society).
- Harviainen, Tapani. 1977. *On the Vocalism of the Closed Unstressed Syllables in Hebrew: A Study Based on the Evidence Provided by the Transcriptions of St. Jerome and Palestinian Punctuations*. Studia Orientalia 48/1 (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society).
- Harviainen, Tapani. 1985. 'Drag ur den finländska judenhetens historia', *Nordisk judaistik / Scandinavian Jewish Studies*, 6/2: 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.69393>
- Harviainen, Tapani. 2000. 'The Jews in Finland and World War II'. *Nordisk judaistik / Scandinavian Jewish Studies*, 21/1–2: 157–66. <https://doi.org/10.30752/nj.69575>
- Harviainen, Tapani, & Karl-Johan Illman. 1998. *Juutalainen kulttuuri* (Helsinki: Otava).
- Tuori, Riikka, & Tapani Harviainen. 2018. *Pyhiä juutalaisia kirjoituksia* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus).
- Polliack, Meira (ed.). 2003. *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to its History and Literary Sources*. Handbuch der Orientalistik 1/73 (Leiden: Brill).