

Obituary: Phillip Vallentine Tobias (1925-2012)

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Carrying Phillip Vallentine Tobias's traditional simple pine coffin to his grave in the red soil of West Park's Jewish Cemetery in Johannesburg, former president Thabo Mbeki signalled the truly huge achievement of Tobias's majestic life.

Alongside his immense academic and scientific accomplishments – in the fields of anatomy, genetics and zoology; as Director of the Palaeoanthropology Research Unit which excavated the Sterkfontein site for decades; as recipient from former president Nelson Mandela of the rarely-given Order of the Southern Cross and much more – Tobias was also a political animal, albeit one only minimally involved with party politics. “The Liberal Party was the only political party with which I was ever affiliated, but eventually I had to leave when I could not find time to do justice to my interest in the political arena,” he said in his autobiography.

Tobias nonetheless continued to engage politically throughout his life, actively opposing, among other things, racial segregation in education, and taking legal action against medical professional collusion with police brutalisation of Steve Biko.

Tobias implicitly promoted non-racism in the classroom as well, scientifically pooh-pooing the eugenic notions of anatomy on which the apartheid project rested. “His work scientifically debunked the myths of white supremacy,” said Wits Vice Chancellor, Professor Loyiso Ngongxa recently, speaking at that university’s memorial service in Tobias’s honour. “Imagine in the 1960s, when being black was seen as inferior, that he could advance a theory that the origins of humankind was on the African continent!”

The son of Jewish immigrants (his father Joseph – the great-grandson of Anglo-Jewish publisher Isaac Vallentine whose name Phillip Vallentine Tobias, himself an accomplished English scholar, carried with pride – was from England; his mother Fanny, née Rosendorff, from Germany), Tobias was raised in Durban. As a child, he watched British and Allied ships dock at the harbour, and heard gunfire and exploding

depth-charges out at sea where German U-boats and Japanese submarines targeted Allied convoys. With their immediate consequences for Tobias’s extended family in Europe, Hitler’s war against the Jews and the genocide of European Jewry must necessarily have been formative topics of discussion in the Tobias household.

For nearly seventy years, spanning his arrival at Wits as a student in 1943 to emeritus professor at the time of his passing, Tobias built a politically trenchant body of science on the back of his early rejection of white supremacy.

“Under the Nazi regime, race purity became a fetish ... But the magic shadow-show of race purity has not been confined to Nazi Germany. South Africans, too, have had this fetish drummed into their heads by the legislators,” he said in 1961. He was delivering a lecture entitled ‘The Meaning of Race’ to the Union of Jewish Women in Johannesburg. Subsequently published by the South African Institute of Race Relations, the paper constitutes the quintessential scientific rejection of apartheid racism and Afrikaner nationalist ideology.

Tobias understood that his anthropological and genetic research made a mockery of the apartheid state’s system of race classification and directly challenged the then rapidly developing policies and legislation designed by the state to maintain white racial ‘purity’. “[S]cientist[s] like myself whose special field of research and study is *race* [are] likely to be accused of meddling in politics merely by talking about the scientific aspects of *race* ... [But] I should be failing ... in my academic duty, if I were to ... say nothing about race, simply because the scientific truth about race may run counter to the race policies of my country,” he said.

He scientifically rejected white supremacist belief in racial purity, demonstrating the non-existence of an originary pure white race. “The myth of the pure race has been thoroughly disproved ... [F]rom the dawn of man ... to the present day, there is no trace of a pure human race ... [and] as far as our fossil record goes, there never ha[s] been,” he said. “[S]everal kinds ... of the [early] South African fossil ape-men, the Australopithecines ... are known from the caves of the central and Southern Transvaal, the North-Eastern Cape province and Tanganyika,” he said, simultaneously describing the hominid ancestry that was common to all people of different races.

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Tobias emphasised the overarching genetic commonality between all people “which make men men, which give us two legs, an upright stance, a big brain, mobile fingers and a prehensile thumb”, in contrast to the genetic variations differentiating races which he characterised as “little superficial frill[s]”. “[A]ll of us human beings share far more of our essential humanity in common and differ in far fewer respects than doctrinaire racists would like us to believe!” he said.

Further, Tobias’s assault on white supremacy boldly located this common ancestral origin not in Europe but in Africa itself. Africa was “the continent where, on available fossil evidence, man first emerged on the face of our planet; where man first started to differentiate himself from the other beasts by his cultural life, through tools of stone and bone,” said Tobias in 1961. “Some people ask, ‘what’s Africa given the world?’ in sneering tones, as if they know the answer: ‘nothing’. But the truth is Africa gave the world humanity ... and the first human culture,” he would say forty years later.

Every year, Tobias gave his second year anatomy students a lecture on the origins of man before taking them on an outing to Sterkfontein (now, in large measure thanks to Tobias, a world heritage site) to show them the actual site where ‘Mrs Ples’ – the most complete skull of a more than two million year old

Australopithecus africanus specimen yet found in South Africa – was discovered. He would thus demonstrate to his students that not only was the South African landscape populated long before the arrival of Europeans, but that in fact all of mankind originated in Africa.

Tobias had youthful religious aspirations to join the rabbinate. Fortunately for the world of science, the disillusioned Rabbi AH Freedman whom he consulted for career advice encouraged him to find an alternative path. (One can only speculate at what cost to the South African rabbinate). Nearly sixty years later, in an interview marking his eightieth birthday, he described his career and achievements in quasi-rabbinic terms. “Philosophically it is terribly important that these fossils of hominids are seen as our common human ancestors. This is the scientific basis of the brotherhood of man,” he said. Referring to the religious precept that all humankind is created equal in the image of God, he echoed the sermon entitled ‘The Brotherhood of Man’ delivered in the late ’40s by then Chief Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, rabbi of the Wolmarans Street Synagogue of which Tobias was a member. “All men are equal, black and white and coloured, all hark back to one common origin, all are endowed with the spark of God’s spirit. This is the fundamental teaching of the Torah,” Rabinowitz said.

Mbeki used his presidential office towards transforming the foundations of the racist colonial relationship between Africa and Europe. Tobias’s Sterkfontein is a pillar of this reversal: Africa is not *marginal* but *central* to human history.

This was Mbeki’s tribute as he spaded soil into Tobias’s grave. Tobias was “central in making the statement that humanity originated in the [African] continent,” said Mbeki. “[H]e would naturally be militantly opposed to racism because he firmly believed in equality of all human beings,” he said.

Tobias underpinned his life with a personal philosophy of happiness obtainable not in the moment but only in retrospect. He similarly located meaning in the past, a past that was the origin of humankind. Correctly characterising this legacy as “too important and too durable to be forgotten”, Mbeki signalled that, just as Mrs Ples’s life took time to evolve into its immense significance, so too, with time, will Tobias’s life indubitably grow ever more significant, in South Africa and beyond.