



Seminar

JAN RETSÖ

Fellow, SCAS.

Professor of Arabic, University of Gothenburg

*Decomposing a 'Great Narrative'.  
The Exodus: The Context and Background of the  
National Myth of Ancient Israel*

Wednesday, 11 March, 6:15 p.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall  
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala  
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The seminar will be followed by a reception.  
Please contact [rsvp@swedishcollegium.se](mailto:rsvp@swedishcollegium.se) no later than 6 March to sign up.

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#### ABOUT JAN RETSÖ

Jan Retsö received his Ph.D. from the University of Gothenburg in 1983 for the thesis *The Finite Passive Voice in Modern Arabic Dialects* (Orientalia Gothoburgensia 7). He was appointed Professor of Arabic at the University of Gothenburg in 1986. His publications include the monographs *Diathe-sis in the Semitic Languages: A Comparative Morphological Study* (Leiden 1989; Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, vol. XIV), 254 pp.; *The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London/New York: Routledge/Curzon, 2003), 684 pp.

Retsö has been a Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study, Uppsala (spring 2000); a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2003–04); Professeur invité at the École normale supérieure lettres et sciences humaines de Lyon (8 January–7 February 2006); and Visiting Scholar, University of Salford (February–April 2007). He is a member of the Royal Society of Arts and Sciences (KVV) in Gothenburg and the Royal Society of Humanities and Sciences (KHVSL) in Lund.

Retsö's principal field of research is comparative and diachronic studies of the Semitic languages, including Arabic in all its forms, classical and modern spoken, and the history of pre-Islamic Arabia. His current main project is entitled 'The Mountain in the Wilderness: Arab and Israelite Origins'. This project is a continuation of the monograph published in 2003 and will be pursued at SCAS.

#### ABSTRACT

The starting point is the result of my monograph from 2003: *Arabs in Antiquity*, in which I concluded that the term 'Arab' originally designates a kind of religious community, characterized by initiation and subjection to a deity or a semi-divine hero, implying certain taboos: prohibition of drinking wine and living in houses built of stone, prescription of certain kind of dress and hair-cut, a special relationship to the camel and attachment to a special kind of sanctuary. One of these sanctuaries turned out to be identical with one of the main stations of the desert-wandering of the Israelites as told in the Pentateuch, viz. Qadesh Barnea. This initiated a deepened study of this complex in order to understand a possible connection between these earliest 'Arabs' and similar traditions from Arabia and ancient Israel. It is suggested that the common factor is a ritual that was performed in several places in Arabia on the border-line between the desert and the sown. The mythology around this ritual is, apart from the Old Testament, accessible through the Arabic legends about Ad and Thamud, 'peoples' mentioned in the Koran among peoples who have perished. Early Arabic literature has preserved several narratives about them which have an archaic touch and are not derived from the hints in the Koran. Both van Gennep's *Rites de Passage* and V. Turners studies on liminality in so-called primitive societies are important clues for understanding the ritual. It is argued that we here see one of the crucial factors behind the rise of monotheism in the Middle East.