

Frank Moore Cross (1921-2012)

by

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Frank Moore Cross, one of the premier biblical scholars of the past century, died early Wednesday morning, October 17, 2012 in Rochester, New York. He was 91. Cross had been Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages Emeritus at Harvard University, where he taught for thirty-five years before retiring in 1992. After retirement, he and his wife, Elizabeth (Betty) Anne, remained at their home in Lexington, Massachusetts, and then moved in 2008 to a suburb of Rochester, New York, to be near one of their daughters, Ellen Gindele, and her family; Betty Anne Cross died in May, 2009.

Born on July 13, 1921, the son and grandson of Protestant ministers, Cross was educated at Maryville College (1942), where he studied chemistry and philosophy and was a competitive swimmer, and McCormick Theological Seminary (1946), and then took his doctorate at Johns Hopkins University (1950). At Hopkins, his mentor was the renowned ancient Near Eastern scholar, William Foxwell Albright, and he quickly became one of Albright's most important pupils. Leaving Hopkins, where he had been a junior instructor, he went on to teach at Wellesley College and McCormick Seminary, before coming to Harvard in 1957.

Cross had a broad and deep command of the study of the Hebrew Bible and its multiple historical contexts, and achieved distinction in several areas of this field. He was an expert in the interpretation of biblical literature, making lasting contributions to the understanding of biblical poetry, particularly its earliest phases, of the compositional development of the great historical narratives of the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra and Nehemiah, and of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic. He was in the forefront of those investigating the history and culture of ancient Israel, from which the Hebrew Bible emerged, and of its relationships to the ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures around it. Especially incisive and important here was his work on the character and history of ancient Israelite religion, emphasizing its background in and adaptation of beliefs and practices from its Canaanite neighbors and forebears. Cross was also a master of the ancient Semitic languages and their interrelationships, particularly the Northwest Semitic group, from the eastern Mediterranean and north Africa, that included Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Punic. In these languages and their inscriptions he achieved special recognition as an epigrapher and palaeographer. As an epigrapher, he was regularly consulted by scholars from all over the world for his uncanny skill at deciphering and making sense of these inscriptions. As a palaeographer, he produced meticulous studies of the scripts in which the

inscriptions were written, reconstructing the chronological developments of these scripts and thus providing a vastly improved foundation for dating the inscriptions on the basis of the type and character of the script used. Most famous in this regard was his study of the scripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, originally completed in 1958, and with but minor adjustments, still the essential resource for the analysis and dating of these important texts. Cross also was a major specialist in the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible; his research on the ancient manuscripts and versions of the Bible yielded new and far-reaching conclusions as to how the biblical text was composed and transmitted. Last and perhaps most well known was Cross' scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls, those texts from the last centuries BCE and first century CE that came from a dissident Jewish community which had gone into the Judaeen wilderness to await the end of history and the coming of a new age. Cross was one of the core members of the original team of experts piecing together and deciphering the often fragmentary Scrolls, and worked on all aspects of them, publishing editions especially of the biblical manuscripts, and a path-breaking study of the entire Dead Sea Scroll community, The Ancient Library of Qumran, which went through three English editions and one German from 1958 to 1995.

Several features distinguished the scholarship just described. There was first a combinatorial talent: Cross's ability to bring to bear on a particular problem an integrated range of skills, linguistic, literary, historical, archaeological, philosophical. Cross also was able to move in a fluent dialectic between the painstaking examination of minute details and a vision of the larger issues and structures to which the details could belong. And one cannot forget the skill at communication: the explanations were always lucid, if at times complex, and in a chiseled prose that could manage in a few pages what others would need many more to express.

These same features also distinguished Cross' teaching. His courses introducing the Hebrew Bible and on the history of ancient Israelite religion became staples for a large and broad range of students from beginners to more advanced. At the doctoral level students came to him from North America and beyond, and in his three and half decades at Harvard, he was the primary director of over one hundred of them and their dissertations, serving many more as a member of their dissertation committees - a record unsurpassed and probably unequalled internationally in his field. Cross was a demanding teacher, setting the bar high in terms of technical competence and broad, humanistic learning. He also had a remarkable knack for taking his students to the very frontiers of knowledge in the field, and imbuing them palpably with the excitement of standing at the brink of new discoveries. To be sure, he could at times appear formidable, even fearsome, but beneath the austerity was a warm human being who followed his students' careers long after they had graduated, and who loved hearing as much as telling good jokes. Humor was indeed a deep part of his character, and Mark Twain one of his favorite authors. The gentleness could be found as well in his passion for horticulture: he was an expert cultivator especially of orchids.

The honors that come from such a record of achievement were many. Seven honorary doctorates from universities in the United States, Canada, and Israel; elections to several scholarly academies, including the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society; the presidencies and directorships of several of the major professional organizations in his field, like the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Schools of Oriental Research; co-founder and co-chair of the Hermeneia Biblical Commentary Series and editor or editorial board member of other major series and journals; recipient of several major awards for scholarship, including the Percia Schimmel Prize in Archaeology of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem, and the Medalia de Honor de la Universidad Complutense of Madrid, Spain; three volumes of studies in his honor (Festschriften) by colleagues and former students, with a fourth in preparation.

Frank Moore Cross is survived by three daughters, Susan Summer, Ellen Gindele, and Rachel Cross, and six grandchildren.

A memorial service, with accompanying reception, was held at Harvard University, the Memorial Church, on Saturday, November 10, 2012. This was followed by a symposium of memory at the annual national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Chicago on Saturday, November 17, 2012 .