

# *An Appreciation of Frank Moore Cross*

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Frank Moore Cross, one of the premier biblical scholars of the past century, died October 17, 2012. He was 91. Cross had been Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages Emeritus at Harvard University, where he taught for 35 years before retiring in 1992.<sup>1</sup>

Born on July 13, 1921, the son and grandson of Protestant ministers, Cross was educated at Maryville College (B.A., 1942), where he studied chemistry and philosophy and was a competitive swimmer, diver, and track star; and at McCormick Theological Seminary (B.D., 1946). A harbinger of his future career in biblical and related studies was his essay, written during his senior year at McCormick, on the “Priestly Tabernacle of Biblical Israel.” This won him the Nettie McCormick Fellowship for doctoral study in biblical and, more broadly, ancient Near Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University and became his first scholarly publication (1947). The judge of the competition was the renowned Hopkins ancient Near Eastern scholar William Foxwell Albright, who considered the essay to have the sophistication and knowledge of a doctoral thesis, and it was Albright, then, who became Cross’s mentor at Hopkins. There Cross joined a group of outstanding students, including David Noel Freedman, George Mendenhall, and William Moran, and quickly took his place as one of the most important, receiving his doctorate in 1950. For his degree, he worked closely with fellow student Freedman, collaborating with him on two joint dissertation volumes—highly unusual, if not unique in the annals of humanistic scholarship. The first was *Early Hebrew Orthography: A Study of the Epigraphic Evidence* (1952). The second was *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, not published until much later (1964, 1975, 1997).

Leaving Hopkins, where he had been a junior instructor, Cross went on to teach at Wellesley College (1950–51) followed by McCormick Seminary (1951–57), before coming to Harvard in 1957, first as Associate Professor and then, on the death of Robert Pfeiffer, as full professor in the Hancock Chair in 1958.

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, with publications that numbered over 300. He was an expert in the interpretation of biblical literature, making lasting contributions to the understanding of biblical poetry, 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.

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1. A slightly different version of these remarks appeared in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 369 (2013) 1–4.

His two joint dissertations with Noel Freedman, for example, plus a number of subsequent articles, laid out a powerful case for a corpus of “archaic poetry” in the Hebrew Bible, building on the work of their teacher Albright; and although critical reactions have—inevitably—emerged, their case remains an imposing one. Similarly, Cross’s work on the Deuteronomistic History and his argument for a two-stage process in its composition, in the Josianic and Babylonian Exilic periods, offered a new perspective on this major work of biblical historiography and inspired a whole generation of scholarship.

Cross was also 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. The work bore fruit especially in his two volumes *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (1973, 1997) and *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (1998). The essays in these volumes covered a very wide range, from the origins of Israelite religion in Bronze Age Canaan through the apocalyptic world of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late Second Temple period. Among the topics and motifs that Cross explored, arguably the most striking—and one not without controversy—was his effort to marry the study of literature with the study of religion. For Cross, as adumbrated in the title of the first of these volumes, mythic tales were a characteristic literary form of the pre-/non-Israelite cultures of Canaan, speaking to a world view that tended to emphasize the cosmic movements of the gods. Already in early Israel, however, this mythic literature and its world came to exist in

a perennial and unrelaxed tension . . . [with] the historical. . . . Israel’s religion emerged from a mythopoeic past under the impact of certain historical experiences which stimulated the creation of an epic cycle and its associated covenant rites. . . . Israel’s choice of the epic form to express religious reality, and the elevation of this form to centrality in their cultic drama, illustrates both the linkage of the religion of Israel to its Canaanite past and the appearance of novelty in Israel’s peculiar religious concern with the “historical.” (Cross 1973: viii–ix)

A third area of Cross’s mastery was the ancient Semitic languages and their interrelationships, particularly the West Semitic group, from the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, which included Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Phoenician, and Punic. In these languages and their inscriptions, he achieved special recognition as an epigrapher and paleographer, and one may observe his achievement especially in the volume *Leaves from an Epigrapher’s Notebook: Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Palaeography and Epigraphy* (2003), in which he gathered and revised the bulk of his published work. 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 paleographer, 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. His paleographical studies moved from pioneering inquiries into the origins and early development of the alphabet on through all the West Semitic scripts of the first millennium B.C.E. and early first millennium C.E. Easily the most famous and influential of these studies was his work on the scripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls, originally completed in 1958, and with only minor adjustments, still the essential resource for the analysis and dating of these important texts.

Cross was also 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. More particularly, his theory, based especially on his Dead Sea Scroll work, of three major textual traditions that comprised the history of the Hebrew Bible underlying the emergence of the Masoretic Text—Egyptian/Greek, Palestinian, and Babylonian—became a benchmark for scholars who came after, even when they felt compelled to modify it or move in another direction.

Perhaps most well known was Cross's scholarship on the Dead Sea Scrolls—the texts from the last centuries B.C.E. and 1st century C.E. that came from a dissident Jewish community that had gone into the Judean 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 assembled in Jordanian Jerusalem in the early 1950s to piece together and decipher the often fragmentary scrolls; and while familiarizing himself with all aspects of them, he came to focus on the biblical manuscripts from Cave 4. His numerous publications, however, were not restricted to manuscript editions but covered many topics, including an early and path-breaking synthesis of the Dead Sea Scroll community in its entirety, *The Ancient Library of Qumrân*. The latter went through three English editions and one German from 1958 to 1995 (1958, 1961, 1967, 1995) and may still be read with considerable profit. Cross's final Dead Sea Scrolls publications centered on his magisterial presentation of the fragments of the books of Samuel from Cave 4 (Cross et al. 2005), fragments that he had studied for 50 years since his initial work with the team of decipherers. In this volume, composed especially with his former student and colleague, Richard Saley, Cross offered a comprehensive edition of the fragments, providing in close and abundant detail the evidence for the multiple textual traditions that these fragments represent and that, as he showed, is crucial for untangling the very complex textual history of the books of Samuel altogether.

To the fields of mastery just described, one may add yet another: archaeology. To be sure, Cross was not a regular field excavator, nor did his publications regularly include the standard stuff of archaeologists: site reports and analyses of non-inscribed objects, buildings, and stratification. But his studies at Hopkins with Albright, many years of travel, residence, and inspection of digs in Israel, Jordan, and elsewhere in the Middle East, coupled with his long association with the Jerusalem schools of the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion—all gave Cross a serious familiarity with the methods and data of Near Eastern, especially Syro-Palestinian, archaeology. And, yes, there was also field experience of a more direct sort: with expeditions to Punic Carthage, the coast of

Sardinia, and Ashkelon, particularly as epigrapher, and as the codirector with J. T. Milik of a survey and partial excavation of several Iron Age II forts with associated farms in the Buqeiʿah Valley, just west of the major Dead Sea Scroll site of Qumran. This Buqeiʿah project was carried out in 1955 when Cross and Milik were otherwise engaged as members of the original Dead Sea Scroll research team, and it made them, in the words of Lawrence Stager (Cross's student and then Harvard colleague, who went on to develop the project), "pioneers in the archaeology of frontier desert agriculture" (Stager 2012).

If one could stand back and take a broad look over this scholarship, one would observe several distinguishing features. In the first place, it shows Cross preeminently as a historian, concerned to understand the phenomenon of ancient Israel and its immediate legacy in its wider Near Eastern and Mediterranean settings and to do so especially but not exclusively through its principal witness, the Hebrew Bible. Although theological interests are not absent from Cross's work, they do not surface frequently, and when they do, they are often tempered to the historical task he saw.

Second, there was his combinatorial talent: his ability to bring to bear on a particular problem an integrated range of skills, linguistic, literary, historical, archaeological, and 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. In these respects, his study on "Reuben, First-Born of Jacob" (Cross 1988; 1998: 53–70) is an excellent example, bringing together for close study a wide variety of biblical, epigraphic, and archaeological data to demonstrate how they interlock into a portrait of the tribe of Reuben, dominant in the earliest phase of Israelite history, only to disappear sometime in the 11th century B.C.E. before the beginning of the United Monarchy.

Throughout his work—and this is the third point—Cross was guided by a historian's conviction that every phenomenon, institution, or idea has a preexisting context or contexts from which it develops, organically, in certain patterned ways. The search for these patterns is a search for how types of phenomena develop sequentially; indeed, typology was arguably the major intellectual and methodological leitmotif in his scholarship. This conviction, as Cross saw it, was particularly important in the study of ancient Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible, in which too often claims for their utter uniqueness, their *sui generis* character can be found. Or as Cross put it himself,

The empirical historian must describe novel configurations in Israel's religion as having their origin in an orderly set of relationships which follow the usual typological sequences of historical change. This is not to denigrate the importance or majesty of Israel's religious achievement. It is rather to study it under the discipline of a particular scientific method, a historical method governed by established postulates which, if legitimate, must be applied universally to historical data. (Cross 1982: 131; 1998: 241; 2003: 348)

In these concerns, it should be added, Cross drew even as he expanded on his teacher Albright, whose championing of typology and, more generally, bent for a scientific approach to humanistic subjects appealed to Cross's initial interests in chemistry and philosophy.

As a final point, one cannot forget Cross's 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. A most forceful illustration is the book *The Ancient Library of Qumrân*, which achieves its comprehensive coverage of the Dead Sea community in under 200 pages (so, the 3rd edition) of closely packed, yet smoothly flowing writing. There is another point here, and this is Cross's preference for communicating in essays. To be sure, *Ancient Library* and his two joint volumes with Noel Freedman on *Orthography* and *Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* were real books, in the sense of volumes of integrated chapters around a central theme. But all his later volumes, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, *From Epic to Canon*, and *Leaves from an Epigrapher's Notebook*, are collections of essays, most of them revised from their original publication as separate articles. Like the great German historian of ancient Israel, Albrecht Alt, Cross appears to have become most comfortable with the essay format, in which he could use his scrutiny of a particular ancient text or phenomenon as a window on a much larger issue of biblical, Israelite, or other ancient Near Eastern history and culture.

The features here outlined that characterized Cross's scholarship in many ways also distinguished his 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 were put through the exacting rigors of biblical exegesis, Ugaritic, classical Hebrew linguistics, and West Semitic epigraphy, not to mention the (in)famous fall seminar, Hebrew 200r, which Cross shared with his colleagues on topics in the history and religion of ancient Israel and which promoted the very combinatorial approach that was his hallmark. All told, in his three and a half decades at Harvard, he was the primary director of over 100 doctoral students and their dissertations, serving many more as a member of their dissertation committees—a record unsurpassed and probably unequalled internationally in his field. Many of the dissertations began from leads he provided from his own research and publications, which the students then elaborated, developed, and modified. In all of this, Cross was never less than 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, Cross could at times appear formal, 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. Equally important to him was another passion—for horticulture: he was an expert cultivator especially of orchids.

The honors that came from such a record of achievement were numerous. Perhaps foremost in his eyes was the success of many of his legion of students, who now hold senior positions in the biblical and related fields in universities, colleges, and seminaries, especially in the United States and Canada but also in Great Britain and Israel. In addition, one must note: seven honorary doctorates from universities, colleges, and

seminaries in the United States, Canada, and Israel (Albright College, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Maryville College, Miami University, The University of Lethbridge, and University of Pennsylvania); 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, including the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Schools of Oriental Research; cofounder and cochair of the Hermeneia Biblical Commentary Series and editor or editorial board member of other major series and journals; several major awards for scholarship, including the Percia Schimmel Prize in Archaeology of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem; the William Foxwell Albright Award in Biblical Scholarship from the Society of Biblical Literature; the Medalia de Honor de la Universidad Complutense of Madrid, Spain; and the Lifetime Award in Textual Studies from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture; four volumes of studies in his honor (Festschriften) by colleagues and former students; and a retrospective on his career and work in a forthcoming issue of the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*.

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