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## The End of an Era

### Frank Moore Cross (1921-2012)

Hershel Shanks • 10/18/2012

*There will be a memorial service for Professor Cross in Memorial Church in Harvard Yard on Saturday, November 10th, at 4:00 p.m.*



Frank Moore Cross (1921-2012)

We knew it would happen, but it's still a shock. Frank Cross is dead. I will leave it to scholars to write of his scholarly accomplishments. I will only write of what I know: He stood at the very pinnacle of the profession, universally respected and admired. When he spoke, others stood in awe. The Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages at Harvard University, the third oldest endowed academic chair in the United States, Cross was a specialist in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in obscure ancient languages, in the science of dating ancient inscriptions based on the shape of the letters, in the Biblical text and in archaeology, to name but a few.

I've been at this desk for almost 40 years and by now I can comfortably engage with senior colleagues. In the early years, however, I was a newcomer. I was a lawyer who had never taken a course in archaeology or even in the Bible. In those days, I divided scholars into two categories—those who welcomed novices like me and the other kind, who looked at me from their empyrean heights. Frank was clearly in the former group and I valued his friendship more than I can say.

Whenever I was up Boston way, I would visit Frank, often in his lovely colonial home in Lexington—“that neck of the wood / where once the embattled farmers stood”—where Frank lived with his wife, Betty Anne—by that time, their daughters were out of the house and on their own. Frank raised orchids, which seemed just right for him.

I would sometimes interview Frank for **BAR** and eventually we made a book out of these interviews. We called it *Frank Moore Cross—Conversations With a Bible Scholar*. ([The series of interviews is available online](#))[ i ] One of the most treasured volumes in my library is the copy Frank sent me autographed “with sincere thanks to my co-author.”

Among the book's many insights, I think my favorite is Frank's identification of Mt. Sinai—in Saudi Arabia. At first it sounds crazy, but I think Frank is right. It's in northern Saudi Arabia, near the Jordanian border, in what was ancient Midian. I've always wanted to visit the site and in recent years I knew a senior diplomat who offered to help me; he was very close to the Saudi ambassador to the United States. But even this didn't work: I could get a visa but not permission to visit the northern part of the country.

In all my talks with Frank, I never heard him yell. That didn't mean he didn't have strong feelings. For example, he called John Marco Allegro, a colleague on the original Dead Sea Scroll publication team, "one of the few amoral people I have known ... He was also a limited and sloppy scholar."

When Frank and I talked about the Dead Sea Scrolls, the campaign for their release had already been won, but until that happened we skirted the issue. As I said, Frank was a member of the original scroll publication team that had refused to release the scrolls. And I was the chief screeching voice that was protesting. Moreover, Frank had scroll publication assignments that after 40 years still had not been published. We never discussed this. I had the feeling Frank agreed with me in principle, but couldn't express it. After all, he himself was vulnerable. Moreover, Frank signed the letter (with more than 80 other scholars, including Jewish scholars) defending Frank's Harvard colleague John Strugnell against charges of anti-Semitism. In short, Frank and I had our differences, but I mention this because this only enhanced my respect and admiration for the man. He was willing to respect my viewpoint, as, of course, I was his.

All this concerning the scrolls was a blip that fades into insignificance with the passage of time. Frank's scholarly achievements have had a radiating and lasting influence. I think, for example, of his oft-cited contribution to a 1961 festschrift for William F. Albright, titled "The Development of the Jewish Scripts" that laid the groundwork for the modern paleography of Second Temple scripts. In 2003, 55 of Cross's scholarly articles of this caliber were collected in a volume titled *Leaves From an Epigrapher's Notebook*.  
[ii]

He could also write for the layperson—and gracefully at that. I think of his 1958 book *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies*, which was reprinted a number of times and ultimately reissued in a revised edition.[iii] It is still worth reading—and often is.

I cannot close without noting that Frank had an academic sibling of equal but different stature. Frank and David Noel Freedman were students together under the tutelage of their *doktorvater*, William Foxwell Albright, the father of modern Biblical archaeology. Frank and Noel even wrote a joint doctoral dissertation supervised by Albright.[iv] Noel died in 2008.[v] Now they are both gone. An age has ended.—**H.S.**

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## Notes

i. (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994). [Also available as a free eBook download here.](#)

ii. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2003).

iii. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980).

iv. Frank M. Cross and David Noel Freedman, "Early Hebrew Orthography: A Study of the Epigraphic Evidence" (New Haven, CT: AOS, 1952)

v. See Noel Freedman's obituary by Astrid Beck, "[David Noel Freedman \(1922–2008\).](#)" **BAR**, July/August 2008, and my letter to Noel: [www.biblicalarchaeology.org/freedman](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/freedman).