

Leading Scholar of the Bible, David Noel Freedman, Dies at 85

April 11, 2008

Barry Jagoda

One of the world's foremost experts on the Bible, David Noel Freedman, died April 8, 2008. Holder of the Endowed Chair in Hebrew Biblical Studies at the University of California, San Diego since 1992, Professor Freedman was 85 and had been author and editor of more than 300 scholarly books. His son David said Freedman died from a myocardial infarction at the son's home in Petaluma, Calif.

After receiving his doctorate at the Johns Hopkins University in 1948, Freedman held a series of professorial and administrative positions at various theological institutions and universities but established his main reputation as a scholar and teacher during his long, overlapping tenures at the University of Michigan (1971-1992) and UC San Diego (1984-2008). At UCSD, Freedman was a member of the Department of History, the Judaic studies program and the Religious Studies Program.

Widely known as Noel, Freedman was equally a producer of original research and a facilitator of others' scholarship, not only as a book editor, but as a supervisor of archaeological research, as a journal editor and as an academic mentor. Freedman's doctorate supervisor at Johns Hopkins, William F. Albright, was recognized as the leading biblical scholar of his day.

"Like Albright, Freedman functioned as the 'nerve center' of American biblical scholarship during his time," said William H. C. Propp, professor of history at UC San Diego. "In this there is no prospect of a successor and UCSD's loss is the world's loss."

In recent years Freedman's most important books have included "The Unity of the Hebrew Bible" (1991), "Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah" (1999), "The Nine Commandments" (2000) and "What are the Dead Sea Scrolls and Why Do They Matter?" (2007). Freedman was also the general editor of several distinguished book series, including the "Anchor Bible Series," "Eerdmans Critical Commentary" and "The Bible in Its World." As editor of the "Leningrad Codex: A Facsimile Edition" (1998), Freedman and his colleagues brought the world's oldest Hebrew Bible to libraries, synagogues and churches around the world.

"Noel was the consummate team player and a congenial colleague. He was passionate about the relationship between biblical studies and archaeology," said Thomas Levy, professor of anthropology and director of the Judaic Studies Program at UCSD. "When Noel became ill this year, he graciously donated to UCSD his extensive library, with thousands of books and personal correspondence. This will become the basis of a David Noel Freedman Hebrew Bible Reading Room," said Levy.

Freedman was born in New York City May 12, 1922. He married, in 1944, Cornelia Anne Pryor who died in 2005. Freedman is survived by four children: Meredith Anne and David (and his wife Genevieve) of Petaluma, Calif.; Jonathan (and his wife Kathleen) of Montera, Calif.; and Nadezhda (and her husband John Burgoyne), of Glasgow, Scotland, as well as two brothers, Benedict and Toby, and a sister, Laurie Hayden. Freedman had nine grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

Freedman was writing, publishing and teaching down to his last days and "will be deeply missed by the faculty," Levy said. UCSD will host an international memorial symposium in Freedman's honor in the fall of 2008.

Media Contact: Barry Jagoda, 858-534-8567

