

S. Dean McBride Jr. (1937-2020): A Tribute

S. Dean McBride Jr. was the Cyrus H. McCormick Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary from 1984-2007. Prior to that, he held faculty positions at Pomona College, Yale University, and Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, as well as visiting professorships at Cambridge University, Brown University, and others. He earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1969 as a student of Frank Moore Cross. He served on the editorial board of the Hermeneia series and was on the translation team of the New Revised Standard Version. This list could be extended.

These are simple facts, listings of his service, locations, and spans of time. These facts, however, fail to speak to Dean's character, and it was his character that dwarfed all of his accomplishments and any faculty position he ever held. All who met Dean knew they had met a person of character.

Of Dean's scholarship, his peers often spoke of being intimidated by his intellect, and they were struck by the depth and breadth of his mastery of the field. Dean never permitted his dissertation, "The Deuteronomic Name Theology," to be published, yet still today, sixty years later, it is standard reading in the field. Over the course of his career, his research explored the Torah, biblical law, Deuteronomy, and the Deuteronomistic traditions. He never abandoned an interest in Israel's early national epics or its archaic poetry, which was a subject of his mentor, Frank Moore Cross. He was an expert linguist, teaching me Ugaritic, all the while regaling me with stories from his seminars with Cross. There was a thread that ran throughout his scholarly career, however, and it appeared again in his 2014 Sprunt Lectures, delivered at Union Presbyterian Seminary. In these lectures, he traced the revelation of the Name of God, beginning with the scene of Moses on Mt. Sinai and moving through and into the New Testament. This revelation of God's name, he argued, expressed a particularity of God's nature that demanded that God's people commit to justice.

As a person, though, Dean had a rakish smile and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. Early into my first seminar with Dean, I was reminded of what was said about Aslan in *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe*: yes, he was *good*, but that should not be mistaken for being *tame*. During my years of study at Union, I came to experience and understand this about Dean in all of its complexity.

Dean was dedicated to the Presbyterian Church—his father and grandfather were both Presbyterian pastors. He faithfully attended Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, and later was a ruling elder at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Kilmarnock, where he attended in his retirement. The church shaped his scholarship—not in the sense that it muted or censored it but rather in the sense that it established a mission that directed his scholarship, as well as the professionalism with which he guided his students.

I came to Union Presbyterian Seminary as a Methodist and was not especially well versed in Presbyterian culture. Dean was more than happy to educate me ... and on the error of my ways. One day I asked Dean about G. Ernest Wright's dedication to his father in the *God Who Acts*, which reads, "To MY FATHER from whom I received a dissatisfaction with every present." It

sounded a little harsh to my ears. Dean just laughed. “This is high praise. A Presbyterian father is supposed to push his children, constantly challenging them to do better, to improve on whatever they had first drafted.” It was an important lesson, even if quite simple, for I understood, then, that Dean was not just my *Doktorvater*, but my *Presbyterian Doktorvater*.

While at Union, I had my first paper proposal accepted for the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. Dean did not let me go into this experience unprepared. I worked on it all fall, and a few weeks before I was to read my paper, I read it before our Graduate Colloquium, which consisted of other doctoral students and faculty. It all seemed to go quite well from my perspective, and I left the colloquy encouraged and energized. The next day, Dean called me into his office and began to explain all the ways that the paper needed to be improved. I was a little dismayed, to say the least. I remember saying to him that I was worried that the time was short, it was just a few days before the Annual Meeting, the paper seemed to be good enough, and I would survive my first experience reading this paper. At that, Dean furrowed his brow and said: “You can read a telephone book and survive. You want to succeed.” So, I re-wrote the paper, and have been re-writing ever since.

As a teacher, Dean could take a student’s breath away. His reflections were lectures in the theology of the Hebrew Bible. A “simple” introductory course on Biblical Hebrew, in which the class worked through the first few chapters of Genesis, was an introduction to ancient Near Eastern religion and iconography. As his teaching assistant, my poor section of students learned about the miracle of the “Canaanite Shift” and the wonders of assimilated nuns, while Dean’s section explored the depths of Shamash enthroned above the chaotic waters. In seminars, Dean’s answers to questions were themselves substantial academic articles, delivered extemporaneously, presented point by point in logical, linear arguments, complete with footnotes. If only I could have written fast enough.

As a scholar, his ideas were larger and more expansive than any publication could contain. Famously, Dean once turned in an eighty-plus-page manuscript for an article on the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-5). The editors returned it, stating that it needed to be shorter. An exchange of views ensued, but eventually the article was published (“The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4-5,” *Interpretation* 27 [1973]: 273-306), with Dean anguishing over the loss of every comma.

His students know this story, however, because Dean told it about himself, full of self-deprecating laughter. Alongside Dean’s critical eye—and at times, Dean was brutally honest—was also an easy manner with which he shaped us into scholars. Dean told us this story about himself as something of a fable, one that carried a moral: less is more.

Dean transformed us from students to scholars, from women and men who could track down the answers to questions other people posed to professionals who generated new questions and answers. Today, we, Dean’s students, roam the world, each of us enjoying our own grand adventure teaching and preaching, researching and writing. We love our adventures because Dean first led us through our own wardrobes, not into Narnia, but rather into the land of ancient Israelite religion, a terrain filled with cherubim and fiery thrones and blazing bushes, ancient epics and archaic poems, mountain tops, both sacred and profane, and kings and priests and

prophets, all of whom were subject to a written polity that served as a surrogate for Moses. Dean's rakish smile promised the excitement of the journey. And that mischievous glint in his eye, we learned, was actually the critical insight of a *Presbyterian Doktorvater*.

—John T. Strong, Missouri State University