

In Memoriam: Philip J. King (1925-2019)

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A funeral Mass was celebrated Saturday, December 14, 2019, at St. Joseph's Church in Boston for Fr. Philip J. King, retired professor in theology at Boston College and renowned Old Testament scholar, who died December 7. He was 94.

Fr. King, who taught at St. John's Seminary from 1958 to 1974, and then at Boston College from 1974 until his retirement in 2001, was a respected scholar of the Hebrew Bible and archaeology of the ancient Near East. King received his A.B. from St. John's College (Boston) in 1945, was ordained a priest in the Archdiocese of Boston in 1949, earned his S.T.L. from Catholic University of America in 1954, S.S.L. from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome in 1957, and, finally, S.T.D. from the Pontifical Lateran University in 1959.

King's dissertation, promptly published by the Lateran University in the same year, offered a historical-critical analysis of Psalm 45. This early study typified his approach to the Bible. He wanted to understand whether the psalm is messianic—and precisely in what sense it is messianic. To do so, he adopted a historical-critical and contextual analysis of the text:

We are satisfied to conclude that in ps. 45 the Messiah is typified by an earthly monarch who is the subject of this psalm in the literal proper sense. In other words we promptly perceive in the person of the historical king of this Royal Psalm a pre-figuring of the ideal sovereign of future times. ... In short, the king is the type, the Messiah is the antitype. (p. 129)

The dissertation laid the groundwork for his ongoing effort to move between the historical rootedness of the Hebrew Bible—its tangible human and physical realities—and its appropriation by readers today. And no subject, in the rest of King's illustrious career, allowed more ample opportunity to illumine the historical context of the Bible than archaeology.

King excavated at several sites, including Tell es-Sa'idiyeh (1967) and Tell er-Rumeith (1967) in Jordan, Tell Ta'anach (1968) in the West Bank, Tel Gezer (1968–1969) and Tel el-Hesi (1970–1973) in Israel, and Wadi el-Jubah (1984) in Yemen. In the later decades of his career, he served in advisory roles for the excavations at Tel Miqne/Ekron and Ashkelon in Israel.

He published widely in these fields, including books illuminating prophecy from an archaeological perspective. Two popular volumes included *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary* (1988) and *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Companion* (1993). In these works, he adopted the tone of a seasoned archaeologist who could guide the reader in an accessible, nontechnical tour of the prophetic texts.

Among his many publications, however, probably none produced as much satisfaction as the volume he co-authored with Larry Stager (late Dorot Professor of the Archaeology of Israel, Harvard University), titled *Life in Biblical Israel* (Westminster John Knox, 2001). During the years when King and Stager worked on the volume, I was King's junior colleague at Boston College. He would routinely discuss his latest triumphs of library sleuthing, trumpet solutions to old philological problems, and bemoan the difficulties of obtaining high-quality photographs. Whenever Stager would send him on a "library mission," King would falsely (and humorously) complain of the burden, secretly thrilled to descend into the bowels of Harvard's Widener Library to consult an arcane journal article or excavation report.

On those days when it was necessary to read sections of Gustaf Dalman's *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina*, King would sigh and sit for hours at his desk, stoic as the sphinx. "Wissenschaft," he often told me, "is what this is all about." And for King, "Wissenschaft" was another name for the careful application of archaeological methods to illumine the lives of the people who ultimately produced and found meaning in his beloved Hebrew Bible.

Beyond his scholarship, King possessed a political acumen second to none. He had a sense for how to put the right people in touch with each other, to nurture relationships with a light touch, and to take people into his confidence while always being generous and forthright. He also had an intuitive ability to facilitate productive relationships between scholars and the institutions that fostered their work. Perhaps this is why he was entrusted with the presidencies of so many illustrious scholarly bodies in his career, including the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, Jerusalem (1972–1976), the American Schools of Oriental Research (1976–1982), the Catholic Biblical Association (1981–1982), and the Society of Biblical Literature (1988). Not one given to boasting of his achievements, King nevertheless took pride in being the only person to have served in all of these roles. He was also was a Trustee of ASOR (1973–1990), sat on the board of governors for the American Research Center in Egypt (1982–1985), and on the board of the Archaeological Institute of America (1983–1988).

Among those relationships that King nurtured and cherished until his death were those with his students, including the many seminarians in whom he instilled a healthy respect for the strangeness of the Hebrew Bible and also those undergraduates at Boston College who were forever influenced by his scholarly acumen and his humane regard for them.

The other relationship King helped foster was with Shelby White and the late Leon Levy. Apart from King's joy in the scholarly work that yielded *Life in Biblical Israel* and his other works, nothing so pleased him as the enduring friendship with Shelby and Leon, and his introduction of them to Larry Stager. King always claimed to me that he was the spiritual father of the Ashkelon Excavations, directed by Stager, precisely because he brought Larry together with Leon and Shelby. Phil was also instrumental in fostering the Leon Levy-Shelby White Program for Archaeological Publications and served as its first director beginning in 1997. Later, in 2006, the Leon Levy Foundation established the Philip J. King Chair at Harvard University.

Throughout his career—whether teaching, excavating, serving in learned societies, or ministering to the many people with whom he came into contact—Phil always displayed in his life the principles he derived from the Bible. In his final monograph, *The Bible Is for Living*, published by the Biblical Archaeology Society in 2008, these principles receive illumination. Phil understood himself as a pilgrim, one “who has experienced the ups and downs of life, who has struggled on the way.” For him, the “love of Scripture” sustained him “along the tumultuous journey through life.” If that might sound sentimental, I think for Phil it was not. For him, the Bible, archaeology, teaching, and ministry formed a seamless garment, one that he shared graciously with everyone he encountered.

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