

## James A. Sanders

In memoriam  
1927-2020

On October 1, 2020, James A. Sanders, Professor Emeritus at the Claremont School of Theology, died at the age of 92. He was preceded in death by his beloved wife Dora, and is survived by son Robin and daughter-in-law Dawn as well as two grandsons. Brilliant scholar, beloved teacher, and cherished colleague, his loss will be felt by many.

James A. Sanders was born on November 28, 1927, in Memphis, Tennessee, to Robert E. and Sue B. Sanders. He earned the B.A. degree magna cum laude from Vanderbilt University in 1948, and the B.D. degree with distinction from Vanderbilt University Divinity School in 1951. His final year of theological studies was undertaken at La Faculté libre de théologie protestante de Paris and L'École des hautes études de l'université de Paris. In the summer of 1951 he married the love of his life, Dora Geil Cargille, and they moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sanders began doctoral studies at the Hebrew Union College studying with Samuel Sandmel and Sheldon Blank. He was awarded the Ph.D. in 1955.

In 1954 Sanders joined the faculty of Colgate Rochester Divinity School where he served until 1965, attaining the rank of Professor of Old Testament Interpretation. In 1965 he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary, New York, as the Auburn Professor of Biblical Studies with a collateral appointment as Professor of Religion at Columbia University. In 1977 Sanders joined the faculty of the School of Theology at Claremont (now Claremont School of Theology) as Professor of Intertestamental and Biblical Studies, with a collateral appointment as Professor of Religion at the Claremont Graduate School. He served on the CST faculty until his retirement in 1997. Following his retirement from CST, Sanders taught for many years at Bloy House: The Episcopal Theological Seminary at Claremont.

As a scholar, James A. Sanders is especially known for his work on the Cave 11 Psalms Scroll, canonical criticism, the appropriation of Scripture among the communities of Second Temple Judaism, and textual criticism. The publication of the Psalms Scroll from Cave 11 at Qumran in volume 4 of *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* in 1965, and then again in *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* in 1967 was of great importance because it was the first of the published Psalms materials to show a structure and composition of the final book(s) of the Psalter that did not match that known in the Masoretic Text. It was a window on the late stages of the formation of Biblical books and, more importantly for Sanders, on the dynamism of the formation of the Biblical canon.

At the heart of canonical criticism is what Sanders called the "canonical process," in which a community of believers reads traditions or texts bequeathed by preceding generations through a hermeneutic that enables them to find in those traditions or texts the meaning of the

community's new context. By this dynamic those traditions and text acquired the authority in the community that came to be called "canonical." It was also the process by which those texts grew out of earlier traditions in the first place, and the process by which, after acceptance as canonical, communities of faith continued to find the meaning of their present contexts in the literature bequeathed them by earlier generations. By observing the canonical process in the Biblical literature itself, the critic could infer the hermeneutics used by the believing communities who formed Scripture and who were formed by it. The investigation of this process not only guided Sanders's work in the First Testament, but led also to numerous publications on related Second Testament questions.

Sanders's focus in canonical criticism was on the function and use of traditions and texts for the believing (reading) community and the hermeneutics by which the community adapted them. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the believing community was an emphasis on the readers and their contexts, rather than the authors and their contexts. In this and in his emphasis on the multivalence of texts, he anticipated, from within a broad historical critical perspective, later developments such as reader response and other literary approaches, varieties of contextually oriented exegesis, and reception historical studies.

Sanders's work on the Psalms Scroll led to his appointment to the United Bible Societies' Hebrew Old Testament Text Project (1969-1979) whose work is known through its *Preliminary and Interim Report* and *Critique Textuelle de l'Ancient Testament*. There his canonical critical perspective contributed to the revisioning of the task of textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible for which this project is known. His experience in HOTTP and earlier in the publication of the Psalms Scroll led him to found the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center for Preservation and Research in Claremont in 1978. Then in 1990 Sanders, Dominique Barthélemy, and Hans Peter Rieger gathered what would become the Editorial Committee of *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*.

James A. Sanders loved to teach, continuing to do so into the last year of his life. He was a passionate, inspiring and stimulating teacher. For many he awakened an enduring enthusiasm and love for the First Testament, inspiring some to doctoral study in the field. His Masters students remember him as profoundly influencing their theological development. For his many doctoral students he was a wise guide and coach on their journeys into new intellectual territory that his teaching had opened up.

James A. Sanders was also known for his commitment to cultivating the church's lively and responsible engagement with Scripture. This is visible in the origin of his *Torah and Canon* as a response to a crisis of meaning in the churches during the late 1960s and early 1970s that resulted from a historicizing application of the historical critical method. It is also visible in his willingness to undertake a considerable amount of preaching, teaching, and lecturing in church contexts, and the accessibility for non-academic audiences of works such as *Torah and Canon*, *God Has a Story Too*, *Canon and Community*, and *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text*.

Recognition of Sanders's many contributions came in various forms. Over the duration of his career he received numerous honorary degrees. In 1978 he served as president of the Society of Biblical Literature. At his retirement he was honored with two *Festschriften*: *A Gift of God in Due Season* (eds. R. D. Weis and D. M. Carr; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), and *In Quest of Meaning and Intertextuality* (eds. C Evans and S. Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997).

As James A. Sanders passes, his legacy endures – in his scholarship that impacts contemporary conversations, and in his students who carry on the work he inspired them to do. His memory will long remain among his cherished colleagues, his many students and numerous others touched by his work and life. May it always be for a blessing.

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