

The Life of a Biblical Scholar

Jim Roberts Makes a Full-Court Press on the Texts of Faith

by Leslie Dobbs-Allsopp

Like a dog worrying a bone or a basketball team in a full-court press defense, Jim Roberts has spent his career as a biblical scholar closing in on the texts and contexts of the Bible and driving at their meanings. This spring he retired from the Princeton Seminary faculty, leaving a hole as deep as the rigorous excavations he's carved out researching the texts and languages of the ancient Near East.

Jimmy Jack McBee Roberts first visited Princeton in the late 1960s, hoping to gain access to the Seminary's sizeable collection of cuneiform tablets then in the care of Professor Charles Fritsch. Roberts visited Fritsch in his study at 80 Mercer Street, and while Roberts never did get to see the

tablets, the study, with its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, bay window, and fireplace, made a lasting impression. A decade later President McCord was recruiting Roberts for the William Henry Green Professorship in Old Testament Literature, and offered to show him the house he'd be living in. When he walked in the door, Roberts remembered that this was the same study he'd seen (and coveted) when visiting Fritsch. The study helped to seal the deal, leading to a remarkable 25-year tenure at Princeton Seminary, a world away from the rural Texas where he grew up.

Jim Roberts was raised on a 1,000-acre stock farm in west Texas, six miles from the nearest town. The second of four children, he was the first in his extended family to finish college. As a boy he dreamed of being a cartoonist, a fighter pilot, a preacher, or a chemist. One would draw him because of his love of learning.

Roberts was always a close reader of the Bible. He took it out to the fields to read surreptitiously instead of doing fieldwork, which always irritated his father. Roberts had an early affinity for academic work. At Abilene Christian University he aced chemistry but found it "too boring." On a whim he and a classmate signed up to be Greek majors. It was in a Greek class taught by Professor JM Roberts (no relation!) that he "fell in love" with language study. He studied both Greek and Hebrew as an undergraduate. He married his high school sweetheart, Genie, after his freshman year of college, and their first child was born right after graduation.

Knowing that he wanted to pursue further biblical study, Roberts applied both to Claremont School of Theology and to Harvard Divinity School and was accepted both places. He chose Harvard on the advice of a benevolent aunt who offered financial aid, saying, "Harvard I've heard of, go there!" Jim and Genie packed up the car and drove cross-country during the summer of 1961. He had never driven in big cities and had never seen a toll road. At the first toll booth their combined change amounted to 24 cents, one penny short. For the next two weeks they were sure the authorities would come after them for the penny!

Roberts earned a bachelor's degree in theological science at Harvard, and then stayed on for a Ph.D. in Assyriology. His mentors there were G. Ernest Wright, Frank Moore Cross, Thorkild Jacobsen, and Thomas Lambdin.

Roberts went to Harvard a theological conservative, on guard against any liberal heresy he might find there. He quickly found that "this was not the enemy"; indeed, most of his professors were people of faith.

The first time Wright explained the documentary hypothesis of Scripture was a eureka moment for Roberts—the repetitions and oddities in the biblical text "finally made sense!" He decided to pursue doctoral study in Assyriology because "I wanted a field that was closely related to the Old Testament in which I didn't have any theological bias, so that I could use that as a control for dealing with Old



Photo: Joshua Sutherland

Testament material, where I *did* have theological interest. I didn't want my own prejudices to color the outcome of my scholarship." Studying Assyriology, however, meant studying Akkadian, but mastering its intricacies didn't seem to pose a problem. His secret? Studying in the bathtub! He still finds Akkadian endlessly fascinating "because one keeps encountering new people and new languages" to pursue.

Jim Roberts has never had a problem integrating critical study of the biblical text with faith claims. Ordained quite young in the Church of Christ, he has been preaching and teaching in churches since undergraduate days. As he learned to control the texts and critical apparatus of the field, Roberts says he "simply incorporated the critical stuff into teaching and preaching.... I always found when I worked in a congregation and they got to know me and trust me that I could teach freely whatever I thought was important." In Princeton, Roberts has been active at Liberty Street Church in Trenton, Princeton Church of Christ, and Nassau Presbyterian Church.

The Roberts family moved to Dartmouth College in the late sixties while Jim served as a research instructor and finished his dissertation. From there they went to Johns Hopkins University, where Jim stayed for nine years. After a year as associate professor at the University of Toronto, he brought his family to Princeton in 1979.

Joining the Princeton Theological Seminary faculty as a full professor was "a heady experience," Roberts recalls. "I had never had any status before. I wasn't all that used to people taking me seriously!" (Students here have always taken Roberts seriously, duly quaking at the beginning of each class as he outlines very clearly his high expectations for rigorous work in original languages, and well-written papers.)

Roberts has enjoyed so many aspects of life at Princeton, especially the collegial relationships within the Biblical Studies Department. "I have had a whole string of colleagues who have been creative and helpful and made me think in new ways," he says. Introverted by nature, he did not have the chance to know colleagues from other departments as well, which he regrets. He has always appreciated the quality of Princeton students and takes pride in having helped to build a tremendous doctoral program in Bible. "It's great seeing former students become world-class scholars!"

He and his late wife, Genie, loved living right on campus and walking all over town. When Jim married again, he and Kathryn lived together in Princeton for four years until she completed her Ph.D. and took a call as a professor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. They've been commuting for the last six years.

At the Seminary's April retirement dinner for Roberts, Professor Katharine Doob Sakenfeld alluded to his legendary basketball prowess: "Jim played offensive lineman in high school, and some would say he never gave it up," she said, "particularly on tennis and basketball courts." Roberts demurs: "When I came to Princeton, Leong Seow asked me to play basketball and I had to learn the game all over again.... Leong enjoyed playing at first, but when I got better he got less interested. The legend about me playing rough is completely false. Most of the injuries attributed to me I had nothing to do with. One time President Gillespie attributed an injury to me when I was in Texas!" He says basketball is a way to have fun, to let off steam, and to get to know students outside the classroom. However, as Sakenfeld observed, "Jim hates to lose!"

Roberts's abiding scholarly interests include the way in which the Near Eastern context and the biblical text interact with and inform each other. His colleague Patrick Miller believes "there is no one in the world that I know who has shed more light on biblical texts from materials and texts out of the ancient Near East than Jim Roberts. He is not interested in collecting parallels, but in seeing how other texts enable one to read the biblical text anew and see things that are there."

Roberts is known for his insistence on the early dating of the Zion theology texts because of the parallels to other similar Near Eastern texts. He thinks that late dating of these texts makes no sense. "The idea that one would create a theology that glorifies an imperial power at the time that Judah was an insignificant vassal state seems to me to be the most improbable thing in the world," he says, explaining that there are many scholars who date texts early or late for polemical reasons. Roberts prefers to date texts from the available evidence, particularly parallel texts from the surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures.

Plans for his retirement in Texas include major writing projects, and some hunting and fishing. He's looking forward to living full time with Kathryn. He might also go back to Greek—his first linguistic love. He would love to read some of the classical Greek literary texts: "There's always something new to learn!"

That is the heart of a scholar, and Roberts describes a scholar's life as one who knows it intimately. "It's a solitary enterprise. A scholar is someone who has to just be alone with the text, someone who is in it for the long haul," he explains. "Most scholarship is dry as dust, and a scholar has to be able to go through the desert to get to a watering hole. A scholar takes pleasure in slogging through that desert and coming out with new insights and ideas."

Jim Roberts embodies this life—the endless interest in studying something new, the rigorous work ethic, the curiosity about everything having to do with one's field, and the abiding love of learning. He will be such a scholar for as long as there are texts to read. ■

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