



DONALD WISEMAN

## Donald John Wiseman 1918–2010

THE IMPACT OF HOME SURROUNDINGS on a child is apparent in the life of Donald Wiseman who ended his career as Professor of Assyriology in the University of London in 1982 and died on 4 February 2010. His father was Percy John Wiseman (1888–1948), his mother was Gertrude, née Savage. P. J. Wiseman was working as a senior accountant with the Royal Navy when he was transferred to help found the Accounts Branch of the Royal Air Force in 1918. From 1922–6 he served in Iraq and other areas of the Near East, rising to the rank of Air Commodore, honoured with the CBE (Military) in 1943. In Iraq he collected Babylonian antiquities, visiting, among other sites, (Sir) Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur, so the young Donald grew up in a home where Babylonian bricks, cuneiform tablets, cylinder seals and Hebrew scrolls lay on the shelves. 'They whetted my appetite', he wrote later, 'for such things.' Donald was born on 25 October 1918, following Muriel (1914) and Phyllis (1916) and eventually became the middle child, when Ruth and David were born in 1921 and 1927 respectively.

The family moved to Upper Norwood, southeast London, in 1919, so Donald was educated locally at Dulwich College Preparatory School and then at Dulwich College (1931–6). By the time he entered the college, the family had taken up residence in Kent and then transferred to Lincolnshire, making it necessary that Donald board during term-time. He lodged with a widow living near the school who made him speak French and German at alternate meals, an exercise which benefited him throughout his life. Languages and history seem to have been his major subjects at school and he matriculated to gain a place at King's College London in 1936. Initially

reading English History, Ancient History and Latin, his course changed after discussion with a friend of his father's.

Here the second aspect of the family demands attention. The Wiseman parents were regular members of 'Open Brethren' congregations, taking their children with them to Sunday services. 'The initial experience of family worship and regular churchgoing was a moulding factor in my life,' he stated, yet no pressure was put on the children to conform as they grew up, but Donald made his own commitment to Jesus as Lord and was baptised by immersion in 1932. Thereafter, his deep evangelical Christian faith underlay the whole of his life and work and brought him into contact with a wide range of people across the world. From his knowledge about Babylonia, Wiseman senior believed he could illumine understanding of the book of Genesis. In *New Discoveries about Babylonian in Genesis* (London, 1936) he argued that the recurrent phrase 'these are the generations of' marked the ends of sections in Genesis like colophons on cuneiform tablets. His second book, *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (London, 1946), propounded his thesis that the 'days' of Genesis 1 were days on which God's work of creation was revealed to early man. These works broke new ground in reading biblical texts beside Babylonian, that is, in the context of other ancient writings, but have not carried conviction. However, Donald supported his father's ideas and republished the two works in a single volume as *Clues to Creation in Genesis* (London, 1977).

One of the people Donald met was his father's friend W. J. Martin, Rankin Lecturer (later Senior Lecturer) in Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages at the University of Liverpool, 1937–70. He had taken a doctorate in Assyriology under Benno Landsberger at Leipzig, worked briefly on cuneiform tablets from Ur, and then was living at Hoylake on the Wirral. There low tides exposed long stretches of sand where he walked with Wiseman, talking about his future, persuading him that he should turn his attention to the world of the Bible and learn Semitic languages. King's College permitted him to change courses to read Hebrew with Assyrian, the first student to do so. He learnt Hebrew in the Faculty of Theology, winning the McCaul Hebrew prize, but Sidney Smith, Honorary Lecturer in Accadian Assyriology and Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, was reluctant to make time to teach him, so put him in a class conducted by S. H. Hooke. When Hooke's elementary lessons failed to reach Wiseman's expectations, he persuaded Smith to teach him privately at the Museum for a while until Smith told him there was no point in continuing, as he would be killed in the imminent war, so stopped the classes. (Smith, who had himself served in the

trenches and been wounded in the First World War, was now heavily occupied in rescuing Jewish scholars from Germany and ensuring safe storage for the Museum's collections.) Consequently, he passed the last eighteen months of his degree course studying cuneiform alone. He also attended courses given by V. Gordon Childe and Kathleen Kenyon at the Institute of Archaeology. The Professor of Hebrew at King's, S. L. Brown, successfully nominated Wiseman for the Hody Exhibition in Oriental languages at Wadham College, Oxford, but the prospect of war prevented him from taking it up.

He followed his father into the Royal Air Force and in September 1939 was commissioned as an Acting Pilot Officer, to be involved in various tests. March 1940 brought him, aged 21, to the position of Personal Assistant to Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park in which post he dealt with many visitors and inquiries from the King and Queen and Winston Churchill, as Park was in command of all fighter aircraft in southeast England. In Wiseman's opinion, Park's leadership 'saved not only our country, but the world', something only recently recognised with a statue in Waterloo Place, London, not far from the British Academy. Wiseman was posted to Gravesend, then to Malling, where he flew several sorties in a night fighter wing and reported his observations to such effect that he was transferred to HQ Fighter Command at Bentley Priory, Stanmore, to handle information derived from the Ultra Intelligence operation which decoded the German Enigma signals. Thence he was eventually appointed to work under Field-Marshal (later Lord) Alexander as Chief Intelligence Officer, Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Force, with the rank of Group Captain (1942), to plan landings in North Africa. He sailed to Gibraltar carrying maps and plans and on to Algiers. In North Africa he continued to relay information from Ultra that enabled the forces to advance along the coast to Tunis, taking part in reconnaissance and other activities. As the Allied forces moved into Sicily he was based near Syracuse. Flying back there from an inspection, the plane he was in made a crash landing, injuring his legs. He insisted on staying to recover locally, rather than being evacuated to Algiers, and was back at work two months later, moving with Alexander up Italy, during which time he learnt Italian. On the basis of Ultra information he opposed the bombing of Monte Cassino. He was twice mentioned in despatches; in March 1943 he was awarded the OBE (Military) in recognition of his services and in 1944, to his great surprise, the USA Bronze Star for 'rare analytical and organizational genius . . . selfless and earnest work' which enabled the planning of 'the air operations which brought victory to the Allied Forces in Italy'. As the forces progressed

through Italy, he participated in the surrender of German troops at Bolsano, his knowledge of German giving him an advantage in negotiations with Generals von Pohl and Wolff. Rejecting offers of a career in the RAF, on 28 October 1945 he was demobilised with the rank of Group Captain and moved quickly to take up his place at Oxford. Throughout his war service he seized any opportunity to meet other Christian officers and men, to attend local church services, to call on missionaries and to share his faith with others.

Already knowing Hebrew and Babylonian, he was able to appreciate the erudite lectures of Godfrey Driver on the Book of Job and to progress quickly in reading cuneiform texts with Oliver Gurney, although Gurney went to do research in Ankara, leaving Donald to study on his own, as he had at King's, and to teach a new student, James Kinnier Wilson, who was to become Eric Yarrow Lecturer in Assyriology at Cambridge (1955–89).

As he completed his finals in 1948, a letter arrived from Sidney Smith offering him an Assistant Keepership in the British Museum's Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities, a post he took up at the end of May. Meanwhile, he had become engaged to be married to Mary Catherine Ruoff, a nurse trained at St Bartholomew's Hospital, whom he had met while she was taking a Health Visitor's course in Oxford. Their wedding took place in Enfield on 18 September 1948 and they made their home in Finchley, North London.

When he entered the Museum, Smith entrusted to him the 460 cuneiform tablets Sir Leonard Woolley had unearthed at Tell Atchana, ancient Alalakh on the Orontes, between 1937 and 1949. There are two groups, one written about 1600 and the other about 1450 BC. He was told a large proportion of them was due to be returned to Antakya Museum after about eighteen months, so he had to do his work in that time. In the end, he would work on them, between other duties, for about four years to make a pioneering edition of texts from eras and a region that had produced no others at that time. (The tablets from Mari offered some points of comparison for the earlier group, those from Ugarit some for the later, but they had been published only in a limited quantity at the time.) To comply with the time limit, Wiseman followed the example of his senior colleague Cyril Gadd who had used a catalogue style to publish tablets from sites in eastern Syria a few years earlier, giving full texts of major or typical items, summarising the types and contents, listing the proper names and making hand copies of many.<sup>1</sup> His volume *The Alalakh Tablets*

<sup>1</sup> C. J. Gadd, 'Texts from Chagar Bazar and Tall Brak', *Iraq*, 7 (1940), 22–61.

was published in 1953 (London), he having corrected the proofs while excavating in Iraq. Although not a complete publication, it aroused much interest and has continued to stimulate doctoral theses and other studies ever since.

As tens of thousands of the Museum's cuneiform tablets had never been identified by more than a simple registration, Wiseman made a habit of cataloguing twenty-five after the Museum had closed to the public each day. This process gave him knowledge of a miscellany of texts which he edited over the years. A very significant product was the location of over 1,500 astronomical diaries and related observations which recorded historical and economic details as well as movements of heavenly bodies during the last half of the first millennium BC. T. G. Pinches had made copies of the majority between 1895 and 1900 which had never reached publication. These he handed to Abraham J. Sachs of Brown University to publish.<sup>2</sup> The cuneiform collections also held manuscripts of the Babylonian Chronicle series which had remained unedited. Gadd, who had translated one,<sup>3</sup> urged him to publish four more. They relate events in the reigns of Nebuchadnezzar and his father, Nabopolassar, and of Neriglissar. Important as all are for Babylonian history, the monograph *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings (626–556 B. C.) in the British Museum* (London, 1956) gained wide publicity because one entry told of the capture of 'the city of Judah' (i.e. Jerusalem) on 15–16 March 597 BC, this precise date clarifying the chronology of the last decades of that kingdom's history and so of several biblical passages. That brief entry made this the most widely known and cited of all Wiseman's works.

When M. E. L. Mallowan opened his excavations at Nimrud, Iraq, he needed an epigraphist, so the Museum lent Wiseman for the second season in 1950, then the third and the fifth seasons (1951, 1953). He joined in the work of the expedition wholeheartedly, putting his practical skills at its disposal and making a lasting friendship with Mallowan and his wife, Agatha Christie. Nimrud yielded large quantities of inscriptions, on clay tablets, stone slabs and other surfaces. With his accustomed industry, he used the catalogue pattern he had adopted in *The Alalakh Tablets* to ensure the new discoveries were quickly available to scholars at large. Major documents warranted more extensive treatment, among them being the Banquet Stele of Ashurnasirpal, commemorating a festival and its menu for 69,574 people, and the *de luxe* ivory writing boards made for

<sup>2</sup> *Late Babylonian Astronomical and Related Texts Copied by T. G. Pinches and J. N. Strassmeier, Prepared for publication by A. J. Sachs with the co-operation of J. Schaumberger* (Providence, RI, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> C. J. Gadd, *The Fall of Nineveh* (London, 1923).

Sargon II to contain hundreds of lines of astronomical omens in minute script on a wax coating, now largely destroyed.<sup>4</sup> The greatest prize was the Library of the Temple of Nabu, unearthed in 1955–7. About 250 damaged tablets were recovered. They include copies of standard Babylonian books which enabled lines missing from other copies to be restored (e.g. Epic of Gilgamesh, The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer). Political upheavals in Iraq and other tasks hindered access to the tablets kept in the Iraq Museum, so the definitive edition was not completed until 1996, in collaboration with J. A. Black.<sup>5</sup> Eight tablets lay smashed in a throne room next to the Nabu Temple and formed a discrete group, initially identified by Barbara Parker as treaty texts. After long hours of patient treatment by the Department's conservator, C. A. Bateman, and of reconstruction and comparison, Wiseman reconstructed the eight tablets from 350 pieces and issued *The Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon* in 1958 (as volume 20.1 of *Iraq*). These are treaties imposed by Sennacherib's son on Median princes to ensure their support for the peaceful succession of his son Ashurbanipal to the throne of Assyria. The stipulations are reinforced by a long series of vivid and frightful curses on any traitor, using a number of unusual phrases. Given that no up-to-date dictionary of the language existed at the time of his work, the achievement is the more remarkable. A German colleague commented on the 'astonishing speed' of the publication, whilst making numerous small corrections,<sup>6</sup> while Mallowan, the Director of the Nimrud excavations, wrote of Donald being 'faced with problems which might have occupied many for a lifetime'.<sup>7</sup> Wiseman saw similarities between the treaties with their curses and Old Testament covenants, notably in the book of Deuteronomy, suggesting that the Assyrian texts continued a tradition seen in Hittite treaties of Late Bronze Age and Old Testament covenants 'some of which may well have originated in the second millennium BC'.<sup>8</sup> He explored some of the parallels in a paper read to the Society for Old Testament Study in January 1958, which he did not publish.

An Assistant Keeper's tasks included answering inquiries from the public and Wiseman noted from his official diaries that he had dealt with over 10,000 in his fourteen years at the Museum. In addition, there were

<sup>4</sup>D. J. Wiseman, 'A New Stela of Aššur-našir-pal from Nimrud', *Iraq*, 14 (1952), 24–44; 'Assyrian writing boards', *Iraq*, 17 (1955), 3–13.

<sup>5</sup>D. J. Wiseman and J. A. Black, *Literary Texts from the Temple of Nabu*. Cuneiform Texts from Nimrud, 4 (London, 1996).

<sup>6</sup>R. Borger, 'Zu den Asarhaddon-Verträge aus Nimrud', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 54 (1961), 173–96.

<sup>7</sup>D. J. Wiseman, *Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London, 1958), p. ii.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 26–30.

numerous written requests for information of all sorts relating to the collections or from colleagues for collation of passages on tablets. There was also a constant flow of scholars coming to study in the department to whom he gave courteous attention and whatever help he could, advising W. G. Lambert, for example, in the techniques of copying tablets. This interaction helped to rebuild contacts with Continental Assyriologists prevented during the war years. The Museum sent him as a representative to the annual *Rencontres Assyriologiques Internationales*, occasions which he also used to strengthen such relationships.

Another duty was arranging exhibits. The Room of Writing was Wiseman's notable achievement. Largely devoted to displaying the history and scope of cuneiform texts, it presented a wall of bricks bearing royal inscriptions, a selection of cylinder seals, and a case devoted to the early history of the alphabet with the famous sphinx from the Sinai bearing the oldest intelligible inscription in letters ancestral to ours, 'LB 'LT' 'for the lady (goddess)'. The room was dismantled; the cuneiform writings are incorporated elsewhere, but the early history of the alphabet is, regrettably, not so well presented.

As well as identifying cuneiform texts, he paid attention to the Museum's large collection of cylinder seals and inaugurated the *Catalogue of Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum*, with volume I: *Cylinder Seals, Uruk-Early Dynastic Periods* in 1962. Five more volumes have been published by other experts. Earlier, he had issued a more 'popular' picture book, *Cylinder Seals of Western Asia* (London, 1959), with photographs by W. and B. Forman made from old, worn plaster impressions. His desire to spread knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia is evident in that and in the booklet *Fifty Masterpieces of Ancient Near Eastern Art*, written with his colleague R. D. Barnett (London, 1960).

That desire was met in a different way when he accepted the Chair of Assyriology in the University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies: SOAS) in 1961. He had done a limited amount of teaching while in the Museum's employ, notably when there was an hiatus in the lectureship in Assyriology at Cambridge, one of the students being T. C. Mitchell, later to be Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities at the British Museum. Now free from the restrictions of the Museum service, his life took on a new dimension, and he could roam over all the wide areas of teaching and research that interested him. His Inaugural Lecture was published as *The Expansion of Assyrian Studies*.<sup>9</sup> Postgraduate students were quickly

<sup>9</sup>In 1962 by Oxford University Press for the School of Oriental and African Studies.



attracted to the weekly seminars he organised in which he could integrate Mesopotamian history, literature and customs with biblical. His academic standing and warm personality drew younger and more established scholars to spend sabbatical leave to study with him, notably Israelis who took leading positions in those studies in their own universities: Hayim Tadmor, Hanoch Reviv, Bustenay Oded, Zafira Ben Barak, Victor Hurowitz. One of them admired him as ‘hospitable and scholarly’. Among others who came for graduate studies were from Iraq (Amir Sulaiman, Ali Yasin Ahmed), from France (Maurice Couve de Murville) and the USA (David Baker). He cooperated happily with H. W. F. Saggs, Lecturer in Assyriology 1953–66, and, after Saggs was appointed to a chair at Cardiff, fostered the careers of younger Assyriologists—Alan Millard, Nicholas Postgate, Martin Selman and Johanna Firkbank—with one-year appointments. In 1964, he was able to secure a permanent post for David Hawkins, who eventually succeeded to the Chair as Professor of Ancient Anatolian Languages in 1996.

The study of Assyriology in post-war Europe was the subject of an investigation for the Council of Europe’s Council for Cultural Co-operation to ‘indicate the facilities, research orientation and needs of member countries’. Wiseman produced the report *European Research Resources: Assyriology* in 1967 on the basis of a questionnaire answered by forty universities and through personal correspondence. Its conclusions were predictable and sanguine: the subject should be taught in all faculties of Ancient History, Linguistics, Law, and Science and History of Science; additional posts should be established in museums and libraries as well as universities, with research fellowships; interchange of students for special themes of study should be fostered. What impact the report had is impossible to measure. It would be timely for the successor body in the EU to commission a new report.

SOAS gave leave to attend the Assyriological Rencontres, to lecture abroad and to join excavations. Thus he was able to serve as epigraphist for the British School of Archaeology in Iraq’s work at Tall al-Rimah in 1966,<sup>10</sup> and to further the work of the School in Baghdad (see below). Beside worldwide lecture tours, one taking him to New Zealand where he was delighted to meet Sir Keith Park again, he led tours to the Holy Land and made a memorable three-week visit to Japan with his wife as the guests of HIH Prince Mikasa in 1983. That invitation posed a problem, what could a British university professor take as a gift to a Japanese

<sup>10</sup>‘The Tell al Rimah tablets, 1966’, *Iraq*, 20 (1968), 175–205.

prince? A cuneiform tablet his father had acquired, part of an ancient Babylonian dictionary, was the answer Wiseman found. The tablet entered the collection of the Middle East Culture Centre which Prince Mikasa had founded. At SOAS he willingly assumed administrative duties as Senior Tutor, serving on the governing body and the editorial board of the School's *Bulletin*, becoming Head of the Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East in 1981. That was the time when the government of Margaret Thatcher cut university funds and redundancies became inevitable. Rather than see the careers of younger teachers cut short, Wiseman took early retirement, aged 64, in 1982, with Edward Ullendorff and other senior members. Pressed by colleagues, he submitted his published work and received a D.Lit. from the university in 1969, the same year in which 'to my surprise' he was elected to the British Academy.

His Fellowship opened new possibilities for him to advance archaeological work in the Near East. From 1984 to 1987 he served on the Academy's Standing Committee for the Schools and Institutes, which initiated inspections of each in the context of a wider examination of their roles in undertaking and facilitating British work overseas. He was a key member of the inspection team that visited the Schools in Jerusalem (of which he was a Trustee from 1974–94), Baghdad (during the Iran–Iraq War), Amman and Nairobi, and was active in the drafting of the 1985 Report which guided the Academy's policy over the next decade. He served on the Academy's Council during the Presidency of Sir Isaiah Berlin, who invited him to hold office as Vice-President in 1976–7. He particularly remembered from this time the negotiation of a formal Agreement between the British Academy and the Academy of Sciences of the USSR for the exchange of scholars from the two countries. He served, too, on the Academy's Schweich Lecture Committee.

Mallowan excavated at Nimrud under the aegis of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. That organisation, founded in memory of Gertrude Bell in 1932, was to become one of Wiseman's central preoccupations. For twenty-five years, from 1953 to 1978, he was the main editor of the journal *Iraq* (volumes 15–40), jointly with Mallowan until 1971, then with J. D. Hawkins, maintaining its position as one of the leading journals in the field. He joined the School's Council in 1955, was elected Vice-Chairman in 1966, Chairman in 1970 until he became Vice-President in 1988, and President from 1993 to 2000. As in every committee on which he served, he was as regular in attendance as other engagements allowed, expressing his sensible and practical views considerably. As A. R. George

has written, 'In presiding over meetings, he displayed characteristic good nature and detachment,' with the ability to draw discussions to clear conclusions. (Although he remarked to the writer more than once that he sometimes talked too much!) From 1961 to 1964 he was Joint Director with David Oates, then and later travelling to Baghdad on the School's behalf, making excursions to its fieldwork, copying tablets and maintaining connections with Iraqi colleagues. Despite the closure of the School by Iraqi authorities in 1973, a base and activities continued under the name The British Archaeological Expedition to Iraq until 1997. Wiseman was convinced that the School's policy of avoiding any activity or research into the country's recent history, politics or social affairs was a reason its presence was tolerated. The School dedicated volume 50 (1988) of *Iraq* to him and to Barbara Lady Mallowan, and affixed a letter of greeting on his eightieth birthday to volume 60 (1998).

Soon after arriving in Oxford in 1945, Wiseman joined the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union, enthusiastically engaging in its evangelistic meetings. He was soon approached to travel to America to be a delegate of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) to the founding of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students at Harvard in 1948. That gave him the opportunity to go to major centres of Assyriological studies in the United States as well, so he met several of the leading scholars of the time (A. Goetze, F. J. Stephens, F. R. Steele, S. N. Kramer, and W. F. Albright). In Britain the Inter-Varsity Fellowship had founded Tyndale House in Cambridge as a residential library for Biblical Research. J. N. D. Anderson was its first Warden and he and Wiseman were to become colleagues later in London University where Anderson lectured in Law at SOAS before taking the directorship of the Institute for Advanced Legal Studies in 1959.<sup>11</sup> Wiseman saw Tyndale House with the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research as a prime resource for building positive biblical scholarship and training young scholars (among them, at different times, K. A. Kitchen and H. G. M. Williamson), so he gave much time and thought to it, especially as Chairman from 1957 to 1986, guiding it through a period of reorganisation, strengthening the emphasis on biblical studies in conjunction with the New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce.<sup>12</sup> As in every society he joined, Wiseman readily attended to practical aspects as well as matters of policy, suggesting, for example, how an extension to the library might be neatly fitted into the

<sup>11</sup> See *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 90 (1996), 251–63.

<sup>12</sup> See *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 80 (1991), 245–60.

grounds. Members of the Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Study Group dedicated a small volume of essays to him in 1994 as a mark of appreciation.<sup>13</sup>

In his autobiography, Wiseman states that, while at Oxford, 'I felt a call to apply my interest in Biblical languages and an understanding of the culture of the ancient Near East to the better understanding of the Bible and to further this among educated Christians.' This became a major complement to his academic Assyriology. In 1927, his father had read a paper on 'Babylon in the days of Hammurapi and Nebuchadrezzar' to the Victoria Institute (founded in 1865, now known as Faith and Thought) which convened to 'investigate . . . important questions of Philosophy and Science, especially those bearing upon Holy Scripture', and another on 'Archaeology and literary criticism of the Old Testament' in 1945,<sup>14</sup> so it was a natural forum for Donald to present 'Some recent trends in Biblical archaeology' in 1950 and further papers in 1954, 1955 and 1956, the last, 'The place and progress of Biblical archaeology', being The Gunning Prize Essay.<sup>15</sup> He lectured frequently on the topic in many places and was often invited to contribute to Bible dictionaries and handbooks by editors in Britain and America. In 1958, at the urging of the publisher, he wrote *Illustrations from Biblical Archaeology* (London), describing and illustrating numerous discoveries in a clear, straightforward style. At the outset he made his attitude to the subject plain, 'confirmation of the biblical narrative' may be 'expected and found in contemporary documents' (p. 6), but concluding, yet 'great care is needed, both in the selection of facts from archaeology as a whole, and in the integration of the evidence with the proved results of Old Testament scholarship' and quoting Sir Frederic Kenyon (President of the Victoria Institute 1946–52) on the positive role of archaeological research for biblical interpretation (p. 102). Thus he distanced himself from those who too enthusiastically take archaeological discoveries as a means to 'prove the Bible is true', expecting, rather, to find corroboration of biblical statements in the ancient sources, using the term 'confirmation' repeatedly. At the same time, he avoided forcing either the biblical text to fit with some discovery, or adducing a discovery to illuminate the Scriptures without good reason. Changes in the interpretation of some findings were to be expected and he was ready to take them into

<sup>13</sup>R. S. Hess, G. J. Wenham, P. E. Satterthwaite (eds.), *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50* (Exeter, 1994).

<sup>14</sup>*Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, 59 (1927), 121–36; 77 (1945), 101–11.

<sup>15</sup>*Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, 82 (1951), 1–17; 87 (1955), 14–25; 88 (1956), 26–36.

account if he found them justified. Eager to give reliable information to Bible students, he undertook 152 entries (amounting to about 70,000 words) for *The New Bible Dictionary* (edited by J. D. Douglas; London, 1962), a reference volume which proved its worth so that he revised and added some for the second edition (1982) and was Consulting Editor for the three-volume *Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, 1980), drawing on his extensive knowledge of the British Museum's collections. His academic competence in this area was acknowledged when the Society for Old Testament Study invited him to edit a collection of essays by its members under the title *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Oxford, 1973, repr. 1975). The Society elected him its President for 1980.

However, when two American authors, John van Seters and T. L. Thompson, published doctoral theses launching wholesale attacks against the use of texts and material remains to 'confirm' a background for the Patriarchal Narratives of Genesis in the early second millennium BC, championed notably by the Johns Hopkins' scholar William Foxwell Albright, he wrote forcefully to correct some of the erroneous assertions they made. In particular, in an essay entitled 'They lived in tents',<sup>16</sup> he demonstrated adequate evidence for tent-life in the early second millennium BC, denied by J. van Seters, and contributed 'Abraham reassessed' to a volume conceived as a response to the attacks, *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, which he edited with the present writer.<sup>17</sup>

First-hand knowledge of the cuneiform tablets in the British Museum, his edition of the Babylonian Chronicle texts and a visit to a conference on Babylon in 1979 at the invitation of the Iraqi authorities provided resources for the British Academy Schweich Lectures he delivered in 1983 on 'Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon' in which he drew together textual and material evidence for the king's works, arguing that the famous 'Hanging Gardens' should be located nearer to the Euphrates than usually supposed, and explaining the relevance of discoveries at Babylon for biblical exegesis.<sup>18</sup>

His regular, attentive reading of the Hebrew Bible led him to make several fresh proposals for understanding the text. Most notable is his perception that the sentence in Daniel 6: 28, 'So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian', has a syntactic parallel in 1 Chronicles 5: 26, 'So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of

<sup>16</sup>G. A. Tuttle (ed.), *The Bible and Near Eastern Studies: Essays in Honor of William Sanford LaSor* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978), pp. 195–200.

<sup>17</sup>(Leicester, 1980; repr. Winona Lake, IN, 1983).

<sup>18</sup>*Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon* (London, 1985; pb. edn., 1991).

Pul, king of Assyria, and the spirit of Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria' (AV, RV). Since, in the latter, Pul and Tiglath-pileser are names for the same man, so Darius and Cyrus might be names for one man in Daniel 6. The particle linking them, rendered 'and' in the old translations, serves both as the simple conjunction and as an explanatory one in Hebrew and in Aramaic, allowing the rendering, 'during the reign of Darius, that is the reign of Cyrus . . .' just as 1 Chronicles 5: 26 is now rendered, '... the spirit of Pul . . . that is the spirit of Tiglath-pileser'. In this way, the long-standing problem of the identity of Darius the Mede, held by many biblical scholars to be a sign of the historical ignorance of the book's author, might be resolved. However, no other documents refer to Cyrus by the name Darius, so this has to remain hypothetical, yet one that should not be lightly discounted.<sup>19</sup>

Concern for a clear understanding of Scripture naturally led Wiseman to involvement in Bible translation, an activity which he had seen in his teacher (Sir) Godfrey Driver's involvement with the New English Bible. The British and Foreign Bible Society welcomed him to its Translation Committee when it was engaged in 'anglicizing' the Good News Bible and, as the United Bible Society, to its Translation Advisory Group, which took him to various countries to discuss methods and policies of translating. His most significant activity in this area grew from a meeting in 1966 with some American evangelical scholars in New York who were contemplating a new translation of the Bible to replace the archaic language of the King James Version, incorporating the best current knowledge of biblical languages. A Committee on Bible Translation was formed which allocated the books of Kings and Chronicles to him to translate—a large section of the Old Testament. His drafts were revised by another translator, then by the whole committee. The year 1978 saw the *New International Version Bible* (NIV) released in the USA and February 1979 the issue of a British edition. At short notice, Wiseman had been asked to replace American expressions with British, a task which he completed within a few weeks, helped by a few specialists in English and friends with suitable experience. As a result of his representations to the Gideons, the NIV is the version of the Bible now placed in hotel rooms across the country.

<sup>19</sup>'Darius the Mede', *Christianity Today*, 2.4 (25 Nov. 1957), 7–10; 'Some historical problems in the Book of Daniel', in Donald J. Wiseman, Terence C. Mitchell, Ray Joyce, William J. Martin, Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Notes on Some Problems in the Book of Daniel* (London, 1956), pp. 9–16, expanded by James M. Bulman, 'The identification of Darius the Mede', *Westminster Theological Journal*, 35 (1973), 247–67; Brian E. Colless, 'Cyrus the Persian as Darius the Mede in the Book of Daniel', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 56 (1992), 113–26.

Another body to which he gave time was the Scripture Gift Mission which circulates Bibles and selections of biblical texts in many languages. A former colleague wrote:

He became a Member of Association in 1952, a Council Member in 1961, and Chairman of Council in 1978—a position which he occupied with distinction for 14 years. He was, during that time, also a member of the Translations Committee until his retirement in 1994. His scholarly and wise contribution to the work of SGM generally, and his remarkable insights into the problems of Scripture translation were outstanding and, though they may not be aware of it, many peoples of the world owe him a tremendous debt for Scriptures in their own languages which are linguistically correct and culturally acceptable.<sup>20</sup>

His final publication was a volume on the biblical books of 1 and 2 Kings in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series of which he had been General Editor since its inception in 1967.<sup>21</sup> In it he shows his awareness of the main currents of Old Testament research and supports his conviction that the books report accurate historical information with numerous references to ancient Near Eastern sources. The comments he makes demonstrate that he saw no reason to move from the position he held at the start of his career. As he closed his autobiography, he stated, 'It has been my experience that the Bible, rightly understood, does not clash with any finds when they are rightly understood in their context.'

His copies of cuneiform inscriptions are, in most cases, still basic for primary studies, although some of his editions have been superseded by re-examination and the advance of knowledge, while others have been incorporated in new standard texts (e.g. the Banquet Stele of Ashur-nasir-pal, the Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon, the Nimrud piece of the Epic of Gilgamesh<sup>22</sup>). For a large quantity of other texts, his publications still serve. The role he played in speedily making important written documents available to the scholarly world was admirable and deserves to be imitated! His sober and positive use of ancient texts in biblical interpretation, conservative as many may perceive it, also deserves imitation in a field where the accumulation of hypotheses can only mislead students and the wider public.

<sup>20</sup> Norman Brown, personal communication.

<sup>21</sup> *1 and 2 Kings* (Leicester, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> See A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC, 1 (1114–859 BC)*, Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods, 2 (Toronto, 1991), pp. 288–93; Kazuko Watanabe, *Die adê-Vereidigung anlässlich der Thronfolgerung Asarhaddons*, *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, Beiheft, 3 (Berlin, 1987); Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford, 2003), p. 536, MS g, Pl. 46.

Wiseman was energetic, unstinting in his efforts to further a project—Mallowan wrote of him, ‘none has worked harder in the cause of our excavations’—diligent in every activity, a great enthusiast and generous encourager of others.<sup>23</sup> He is remembered for his kindness to all his students, his stimulus to the clever and his patience with the slow, totally sincere, unselfishly concerned for the good of others, a gentleman who was good company, enjoying laughter and life. He was never reluctant to state his Christian beliefs, without any suggestion that he expected his students to conform to them, rather, he respected their convictions and they respected him for that—Roman Catholics, Muslims, Japanese and Jews. He did not stand on ceremony or give himself airs. One Israeli scholar was surprised when he arrived to visit the Wisemans to see the professor emerge in oily overalls from beneath his car. Another former Israeli student observed, ‘He really was a wise man!’ In his later years he was immobilised partly as a consequence of his wartime injury, cared for lovingly by his wife Mary until her death in February 2006, and their three daughters.

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*Note.* Wiseman’s Memoirs, *Life Above and Below*, privately published in 2003, are the major source for this obituary and all unattributed quotations are taken from it. Additional information is drawn from obituaries by A. R. George in *Iraq*, 72 (2010), v–viii, by T. C. Mitchell in *Faith and Thought*, 48 (April 2010), 3–6. See also M. J. Selman, ‘Donald J. Wiseman’, in W. Elwell and J. Weaver (eds.), *Bible Interpreters of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1999), pp. 299–311.

<sup>23</sup>M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains* (London, 1966), p. 15.