

*In memoriam*  
**James Barr (1924-2006)**

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James Barr was probably the most distinguished all-round Semitist and Old Testament scholar of his age.

Born in Edinburgh, the son of a minister of the United Free Church of Scotland who was himself a Professor of New Testament, Barr studied classics and theology at Edinburgh University, with a break for war service during which he piloted torpedo bombers in the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy. From 1953 onwards he held a succession of Old Testament and Theology chairs in universities and seminaries as diverse as in Montreal, Edinburgh, Princeton, Manchester (where he was the writer's congenial colleague) and Oxford (successively there as Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture and then as Regius Professor of Hebrew) before in 1989 moving

back to North America, this time to Vanderbilt University, with his retirement spent substantially in the United States. It was in Philadelphia that a serious fall damaged his health and led to his subsequent death.

Barr's many books include several that can be justly described as epoch-making. This was certainly the case with his *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961), a work which came to be translated not only into many Western tongues but also into those as exotic as Indonesian. In his *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (1968) he demonstrated an impressive confidence in all the Semitic languages and an aptitude for correcting false procedures in linguistic argument; the book has done much to establish a sounder methodological approach to biblical comparative philology and semantics. In his *The Typology of Literalism in Ancient Translations* (1979) and *The Variable Spellings of the Hebrew Bible* (1986) he showed himself as a meticulous expositor of the textual tradition of the Bible itself, earning for himself a position amongst the foremost Septuagint and Masoretic scholars. He wrote a penetrating critique of so-called canonical criticism in his *Holy Scripture. Canon, Authority, Criticism* (1983) and was especially concerned with the role of the Bible in modern society. Even his later years saw him tackling wide-ranging, general theological themes, as in his *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (1993); in his *The Concept of Biblical Authority* (1999), a massive overview of the ongoing debate about "Biblical Theology" in the 20th century; and in his *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (2000). His work during his Oxford years with a team of scholars preparing material for a new dictionary of the Hebrew Bible was regrettably aborted by the Oxford University Press, but the resultant materials were handed over to the compilers of the Revised English Bible so that some of his work is included there.