

DAVIES, WILLIAM DAVID ('W.D.') (1911-2001), Biblical scholar

Name: William David Davies
Date of birth: 1911
Date of death: 2001
Spouse: Eurwen Davies (née Llewelyn)
Parent: Rachel Davies (née Powell)
Parent: David Davies
Gender: Male
Occupation: Biblical scholar
Area of activity: Religion; Scholarship and Languages
Author: D. Densil Morgan

W. D. Davies was born in Glanamman, Carmarthenshire on December 9 1911, the son of David Davies, a miner, and Rachel Powell, his wife. Educated in Glanamman Primary School and Amman Valley Grammar School, Ammanford, he graduated with honours in classical Greek and Semitic Languages in the University College of South Wales and Monmouth, Cardiff, in 1934, completing his BD, with distinction in the New Testament, in the Memorial College, Brecon. Among his contemporaries in Cardiff were the classicist [J. Gwyn Griffiths](#) and his friend [Pennar Davies](#), and there, and in Brecon, one who also became a renowned New Testament scholar, [Isaac Thomas](#).

With his mind set on becoming an Independent minister, W. D. Davies continued his training at Cheshunt College, Cambridge, gaining a B.A. degree in part ii of the Divinity tripos in 1940 followed by an M.A. in 1942. He was ordained minister in Fowlmere Chapel, Cambridgeshire in 1941, and continued as part-time tutor in his college.

He married Eurwen Llewelyn, also a miner's daughter from Glanamman, in 1941. They remained in Cambridge until 1946 when he was appointed tutor in New Testament at Yorkshire United College, Bradford, a training college for Independent ministers in England.

While he was in Yorkshire the volume which changed the course of studies on the Apostle Paul appeared, namely *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948), work which gained him his DD degree from the University of Wales, the first time this degree had been awarded by examination. The volume created a new consensus in Biblical studies, that it was not possible to understand the Apostle Paul's faith nor the early Christians' faith apart from their early roots in Judaism. There were more than theoretic implications in this, in the light of the traditional anti-Semitic attitude of the church, the dreadful tragedy of the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel in the year the volume was published.

As a result, 'W. D.'s name became known internationally, and he was invited in 1950 to the Chair of Biblical Divinity at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. He spent the rest of his career in the United States. He was Professor of Religion at Princeton University, New Jersey, between 1955 and 1959; Edward Robinson Professor of Biblical Divinity in Union Seminary, New York, between 1959 and 1966 along with holding the associated chair at Columbia University at the same time, before returning to Duke University as Professor of Advanced Studies in Christianity and its Roots where he remained until 1981.

During these years the flood of Davies' publications and the honours followed, succeeded in making his name known internationally as one of the foremost New Testament scholars of his generation. By then the Dead Sea Scrolls and information on the Qumran community had thrown new light on the Semitic roots of early Christianity, and his continuing research, not least on Mathew's Gospel, traced even more connections between early traditional Christianity and Judaism. *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* appeared in 1964, *The Sermon on the Mount* in 1966, together with *The Gospel and the Land* eight years later. He won the British Academy's Burkitt Medal in 1964 and he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1967; he received an Honorary DD degree from St Andrews University in 1968, Berkeley, California in 1971, and ThD from Uppsala University, Sweden, in 1974.

He was President of the International Society of New Testament scholars, the Studiorum Novi Testament Societas, in 1976. He spent periods as visiting Lecturer in Erlangen, Münster, Strasbourg, Uppsala, Oxford, Harvard, Vanderbilt, Fordham in New York, and Yale Universities. Throughout all this he kept in touch with what was happening in the churches and chapels. There is no doubt that *An Invitation to the New Testament* (1966) was one of his most popular works, a clear handbook explaining the latest Bible teaching for the use of ministers, Sunday school teachers and church members.

In 1981, at an age when others would be thinking of retiring, he accepted the chair in Biblical Studies in Texas Christian University in Abeline. Even though he retired in 1985 and returned to North Carolina, this led to another fruitful era in his career with a three-volume commentary on Mathew's Gospel, produced jointly with his student Dale C. Allison Jnr, in the

International Critical Commentaries series (1988-97). An eighth edition of his early masterpiece *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* appeared in 1988, fifty years after the first version was published, and a Festschrift was presented to him in 1956 under the title *The background to the New Testament and its eschatology*.

W. D. Davies was a patriotic Welshman. He put great value on the Welsh language and its literature, and carried Glanamman with him wherever he went. His Welshness was a key factor in his understanding of the Apostle Paul and the New Testament. He insisted that protecting oppressed nationhood under threat from foreign empires was as much a part of Israel's history in the New Testament under Rome as was that of Wales living in England's shadow. It saddened him that he was not called to serve as a Welsh Independent minister at the beginning of his career, and that it was in a theological college in England, and not in his own country, that his first academic opportunity came. He was invited back to deliver the W.M. Llewelyn Memorial Lecture in Brecon Memorial College in 1954, the Sir D. Owen Evans Memorial Lecture in Aberystwyth in 1964, and the Pantyfedwen Lecture in Swansea in 1968. He was president of the Welsh People Overseas ceremony in Ammanford National Eisteddfod, his childhood area, in 1970. He received an Honorary D.Litt from the University of Wales in 1977.

He died on June 12 2001 in Durham, North Carolina. Even though he had lived in the United States for more than fifty years (gaining American citizenship in 1956), his ashes, along with his wife Eurwen's, were buried in Glanamman.

Author

D. Densil Morgan

Sources

'Davies, William D.', *Who's Who in Biblical Studies and Archeology*, 1992-3

John Roberts, '[W. D. Davies \(1911-2001\)](#)', *Y Traethodydd* 156 (2001), p. 209-223

The Independent, 2 July 2001

The Times, 6 July 2001

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Personal information from his daughter, Ms Rachel Davies, Durham, N. Carolina

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [W. D. Davies](#)

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