



Professor Donald John Wiseman OBE DLit FBA FKC FSA (1918-2010): A Tribute

When Professor Donald Wiseman died at home on 2nd February 2010, aged 91, the Institute lost one of its Honorary Fellows and a friend. Professor Wiseman was a supporter of the Institute from its foundation in 1947 and a most significant person in the study of the ancient world of the Bible. This tribute has been adapted from an obituary in *The Daily Telegraph* 16 February 2010 with information from Professor Wiseman's autobiography *Life above and below*, (Privately published, 2003), personal reminiscences, and some helpful comments and information from Professor Alan Millard.

Before retirement in 1982, Professor Wiseman had been an assistant keeper at the British Museum and Professor of Assyriology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, The University of London. Professor Wiseman had distinguished military service, a long publishing record, an eminent academic career, broad archaeological experience and was an influential archaeological and academic administrator. His evangelical perspective led him to encourage many Christians in their faith.

Donald Wiseman was born at Emsworth, Hampshire, on October 25 1918. He was the third of five children and grew up in Upper Norwood, London. His father, Air Commodore Percy Wiseman, was a serious scholar of the Bible and was able to combine his work as an accountant in the RAF, which often took him to the Middle East, with the

writing of two books, *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis* (1936) and *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (1946). These works attempt to reconcile the biblical account of creation with theories of evolution. Donald Wiseman later republished these works under the title *Clues to Creation in Genesis* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott: London, 1977).

His parents were members of the Open Brethren, and so the initial experience of family worship and regular attendance at Sunday gatherings played a formative role in Donald's life. Lengthy Brethren meetings can be a trial for children who sit throughout with their families and Donald remembered, on one occasion at least, occupying himself by learning the Hebrew alphabet from the section headings of Psalm 119. Donald also remembered being fascinated by the cuneiform tablets brought from Iraq by his father and how he puzzled over the fact that they remained in their house unread.

At Dulwich College, Donald joined the Christian Union and, at weekends, attended the Upper Norwood Boys' Crusader Class, broadening his knowledge of the Bible. At the age of fourteen he made a personal Christian commitment and was baptised. He played rugby and cricket and had interesting experiences with family and friends, many of whom were missionaries, that helped him appreciate practical activities such as carpentry, brick-laying and gardening, and understand life abroad in a world of foreign languages.

Throughout his life Donald demonstrated practical hands-on abilities and a confidence in foreign places.

After leaving school, Donald went to King's College, London, to do a general arts course. During his first summer vacation he visited William J. Martin, a friend of his father and a lecturer in Semitic languages at Liverpool University. Martin persuaded him that, in the face of the many attacks on the reliability and relevance of the Bible, it would be most useful to concentrate on periods of history and languages directly related to biblical history.

As a result of this counsel Donald turned to studying Hebrew, for which he won the University McCaul Hebrew prize, and Assyrian with Sidney Smith of the British Museum. He completed the senior Hebrew syllabus with Professor S.L. Brown, but had to fend for himself where Assyrian was concerned because Smith was fully committed to moving British Museum material out of London and was helping Jewish academics flee Germany. Donald also received a good grounding in archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, then in Regent's Park, where the lecturers included Gordon Childe and Kathleen Kenyon. While at King's, he joined the Officer Training Corps and the University of London Air Squadron, to the dismay of some fellow members of the Christian Union who frowned on his attendance at war studies lectures.

On the outbreak of war he was commissioned as an acting pilot officer in the RAFVR and served as personal assistant to Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, AOC No 11 Fighter Group, during the Battle of Britain. Later he was posted to Fighter Command and joined a special intelligence group handling the Ultra signals, deciphered at Bletchley Park.

In 1942 he became senior intelligence officer of the Mediterranean Allied Tactical Air Forces and accompanied the First Army in the race for Tunis, providing General Alexander with daily briefings on German military planning. He followed the campaign to Sicily and then to Italy and was promoted to Group Captain.

For his wartime service, Donald was twice mentioned in despatches and in 1943 was appointed OBE (Military). The next year he won an American Bronze Star. His citation recorded that 'the intelligence material gathered through



Figure 1: Wiseman's war medals including OBE (mil) Africa Star, and US Bronze Star. Photo: Wiseman 2003



Figure 2: Wing Commander Wiseman briefing General Alexander at the daily war conference 1943. Photo: Wiseman 2003

his selfless and earnest work' had enabled the Allied commanders to plan and launch the air operations which brought victory to the Allied Armies in Italy.

Donald was demobbed in 1945 and took up an exhibition in Oriental Languages at Wadham College, Oxford, which he had been awarded before the war, studying Hebrew under Professor GR Driver and Akkadian (Assyrian and Babylonian) under Oliver Gurney. After taking his finals in 1948 he was invited to join the staff of the department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum as an assistant keeper.

For the next four years his primary task was the translation of the 450 cuneiform tablets excavated by Leonard Woolley at Alalakh in Syria, work summarised in *The Alalakh Tablets* (British School of Archaeology at Ankara: London, 1953). This work was made possible in part by a financial contribution from the Australian Institute of Archaeology, and in recognition of this the Institute received eleven Alalakh tablets.

Speaking at the Service of Thanksgiving on Friday, 4th June 2010, at All Souls' Church, Langham Place, London, Professor Alan Millard commented that the tablets

had been found in a part of the Syrian region where no others had been found previously, so held many problems. I should explain that cuneiform tablets are usually cushion-shaped and the signs three-



Figure 3: Nimrud 1951, Donald (left) with Agatha and Max Mallowan. Photo: Mallowan

dimensional, pressed into the clay, which makes them difficult to photograph, so scholars normally make two-dimensional drawings of the signs. Donald drew the signs neatly, carefully marking any damage. He was given only a short time to work on them as many had to be returned to the Antioch Museum. For that reason, rather than translating every one, he developed a catalogue style which gave enough basic information for those who could not read cuneiform. This method was to serve him and scholarship well throughout his career, enabling him to make over 1,000 ancient documents available for others to study. In fact, his foundational work on those tablets from Alalakh, published in 1953, has supplied and continues to supply material for numerous doctoral theses, essays and monographs.

The immediate post-war years saw the mounting of several major archaeological expeditions in the Middle East. In 1950, Donald was invited by the archaeologist Max Mallowan to join him and his wife, the novelist Agatha Christie, to act as site epigraphist at the excavations of the Assyrian capital Kalhu at Nimrud, 24 miles south of Mosul in Iraq. He returned to the excavations for several seasons, compiling a catalogue of the cuneiform tablets unearthed there. The Australian Institute of Archaeology was a financial supporter of the Nimrud excavations and received a number of significant objects; these included some cuneiform tablets which were sent to the Institute after they had been baked and translated by Professor Wiseman.

He became a close personal friend of Mallowan and Agatha Christie and was responsible for building Agatha a work room at Nimrud where her typewriter would not be interfered with. When someone posted a note on the

door of this room reading: 'If you want to get rid of your mother-in-law, apply here', Agatha was less than pleased, but was delighted when Donald provided a substitute written in cuneiform saying: 'Bêt A-ga-ta' – 'Agatha's House'. Professor Wiseman's favourite memory of Agatha was her patient conservation of Nimrud ivories and tablets removing dirt from them with one of her knitting needles.

Over the next 25 years, Donald was involved in several excavations in Iraq and Turkey. He was responsible for publishing cuneiform material from Nimrud and Tell al-Rimah. Professor Wiseman was involved with the oversight of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem and British Institute in Amman for Archaeology and History. He was the Chairman and then President of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq and the Editor of its journal *Iraq*.

Donald left the British Museum in 1961 to take up a chair in Assyriology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he remained until his retirement in 1982. He taught and supervised the research of an impressive number of scholars who subsequently held significant academic positions around the world. On retirement, he was made an honorary member of the School and elected a fellow of King's College, London.

Professor Wiseman published a number of notable papers and books. In addition to those already mentioned, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626-556 BC) in the British Museum* (British Museum: London, 1956), documents the history of the Babylonian kings from Nebuchadnezzar. It includes the precise date when the Babylonian army captured Jerusalem and took the young king Jehoiachin prisoner to Babylon, 15/16 March, 597 B.C.

The Vassal-Treaties of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon were found by Professor Mallowan at Nimrud and were published by Donald with commendable haste in *Iraq XX*. He also edited a number of substantial volumes which drew together many significant scholars including *The New Bible Commentary* (IVF: London, 1953) the *New Bible Dictionary* (IVF: London, 1962, 1982, 1996) and *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (IVP: London, 1980).

In 1979 he was invited by the Iraqi government to take part in its symposium on Babylon. He surveyed the possible locations of the 'Hanging Gardens' which King Nebuchadnezzar had built for his Queen, Amytis. He felt that the site by the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way which had been generally accepted as the most likely location for this wonder of the ancient world could not be correct because of its distance from the palace where Amytis resided. Instead he suggested that the site probably lay further west, by the river Euphrates, where the foundations of a massive tower had been discovered and where it could have been conveniently accessed from the palace.

A group of American evangelical Christians had set up a committee in 1965, with W. J. Martin as one of its members, to work on a new translation of the Bible. In 1966 Donald



Figure 4: Professor Wiseman at home with a cuneiform envelope. Photo: Wiseman 2003

was invited to join the project and made an initial draft translation of the books of Kings and Chronicles. When the translation was complete, he led a small group to turn the American text into British English and secured its publication by Hodder and Stoughton as the *New International Version* in 1979. The NIV remains one of the most popular English Bible translations and its success was a source of much satisfaction for Professor Wiseman.

In 1947 Donald had been instrumental in forming an Old Testament study group of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research. He was chairman of the Tyndale House for Biblical Research from 1957 to 1986. During this time the Tyndale Fellowship has made a significant contribution to biblical scholarship. At the suggestion of Professor Wiseman, in 1954 the Institute resolved to provide an annual amount to fund a Biblical Archaeology lecture to be sponsored by the Tyndale Fellowship and a student bursary for a person to undertake studies in Biblical Archaeology.

Professor Wiseman was in regular correspondence with Walter Beasley, the founder of the Australian Institute of Archaeology. He suggested people that the Institute may sponsor, hosted Beasley when he visited London and arranged for the Institute to receive a significant collection of replicas of objects held by the British Museum. On one occasion when Walter Beasley was trying to trace word parallels in Sumerian and Aboriginal languages Professor Wiseman counselled that he was likely to run into 'many difficulties' and be 'severely criticised' and he referred to the unfortunate experience of a Dr Ball who had attempted

a similar exercise with Chinese. Donald contributed a number of papers to *Buried History* including, Ai in Ruins (1971) and Notes on Some Recent Discoveries in the Ancient Near East (1975).

In 1969 Professor Wiseman was elected a fellow of the British Academy and served as vice-president of the Academy in 1982 under Sir Isaiah Berlin. He was president of the Society for Old Testament Studies in 1980 and edited for the society a volume of *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1973). In 1983 Professor Wiseman delivered the Schweich Lectures entitled *Nebuchadrezzar and Babylon* which were published under that name in 1985 (British Academy, Oxford University Press: Oxford).

When ever possible, Donald gave talks to Christian Unions on the connections between the Bible and archaeology. He wrote *Illustrations from Biblical Archaeology* (The Tyndale Press: London, 1958) and also appeared on BBC programmes on the subject. His experience of ancient Near Eastern texts and archaeology led him to argue for the reliability of the Old Testament and its historical background.

Professor Wiseman visited Australia and New Zealand in 1970. In Australia he spoke at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne and at a number of Christian gatherings including a service at St Andrews Cathedral and a conference at Belgrave Heights.

Donald Wiseman demonstrated a practical and steady approach to all aspects of his life. He was an excellent organiser, served on innumerable committees and through effective advocacy, brought many of his ideas to fruition. Sometimes when a committee discussion stalled, he would carefully draw the various aspects of the matter at hand together and then suggest a 'wise' course of action. His proposals were always practical and satisfied many of the competing interests. It is this quality that made him an archaeological statesman.

Donald was for some years an elder in the Open Brethren assembly at Cheam, where he initiated a monthly *Christian viewpoint* series of lectures and discussions, but when a preoccupation with the Toronto Blessing developed he joined the congregation of Banstead Baptist church.

In 1948 Donald Wiseman married Mary Ruoff whom he had met at Oxford where she was studying to be a health visitor. Her father was an acquaintance of his father's on the Council of the Scripture Gift Mission. Mary, who died in 2006, and he are survived by their three daughters Gillian, Mary and Jane.

The Australian Institute of Archaeology can attribute much of its early success to the sober advice and assistance offered by Professor Wiseman. I studied under him in the 1970's and fondly remember his teaching, helpful opinions, kind guidance, gracious demeanour and sense of humour.

Christopher J. Davey

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62614/6gvf4k82>