Is Mendenhall Still Alive?
Generation X Needs to Hear From Him

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Ten years ago, when I assumed my duties as associate editor of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I found myself responsible for assigning and editing hundreds of articles pertaining to the Bible and the study of the Bible. At that time, David Noel Freedman, the editor-in-chief of the *ABD*, was hoping that we could include entries on major biblical scholars, those towering figures of the past several centuries who have had such a profound impact on the modern study of the Bible. Freedman’s one rule was that they had to be dead. Because we had a difficult time assigning these entries, we decided to scale back drastically on this aspect of the project. Consequently, I wrote to a prominent German biblical scholar, Siegfried Herrmann (who was writing *ABD* articles on the great Julius Wellhausen and Albrecht Alt), informing him that we were limiting this component of the *ABD*, and welcoming his suggestions on a responsible way for so doing. In his reply, he expressed his dismay at our decision, but went to add that if we had to cut back drastically then there should at least be articles on the two giants of American biblical scholarship, William F. Albright and George Mendenhall. When I wrote him back, I informed him that we could not include an entry on Mendenhall because our policy was to include only the deceased. His next letter to me began: “Is Mendenhall still alive?” Hence the unusual title of my presentation.

There is a sense of surprise that someone who has had such a profound impact in revolutionizing and reorienting a discipline—any discipline—could actually achieve all this in our own lifetime. Whenever the basic paradigms of an academic field have shifted—and in the study of the Bible these have shifted significantly, thanks to George Mendenhall—it is usually assumed that this took place over an extended period of time. Paradigm-shifters are considered giants in the field, and like the Nephilim mentioned in Genesis 6, these giants of old are presumed to be long dead and buried.

George might be one of the first to protest the claim that he has changed anything. Part of this might be his own modesty; but surely the better part of it would be his great impatience. Over the years his ideas, in fact, have met with some resistance; his hallmark has been his pointed critiques of cherished assumptions about the nature of biblical history and theology. People don’t like to have assumptions questioned. It surely must have been frustrating for him over
the years to watch other scholars initially ignore or dismiss (sometimes viciously) the simple logic and clarity of his insights, only to see them later turn around and grudgingly concede that this or that claim he made is probably correct. As Herb Huffmon, one of George’s first graduate students, said about ten years ago: “Many scholars have published more words and pages than George Mendenhall, but probably none have lived to see their work inspire as many words and pages from others.”

One of my goals this evening is to survey some of the highlights of George Mendenhall’s productive career, to give you a sense of how his work has fundamentally changed the way we understand the biblical tradition and enhanced the way we understand our role as purveyors of that tradition for the future.

First, some basic information you will need in order to understand better the scope of George’s work. George Mendenhall’s career has focused on the Old Testament stories recounting Israel’s history from the exodus at the time of Moses, through the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, their eventual entrance into the Promised Land at the time of Joshua, developments during the following period of the judges, and the transformation of Israel to a political state at the time of kings Saul, David, and Solomon. These stories are contained mainly in the early biblical books of Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, and 1-2 Samuel. Chronologically these events are set in the two-hundred year period between 1200 BC and 1000 BC (in round numbers). Archaeologically this corresponds to the traumatic events closing the Late Bronze Age and beginning the Early Iron Age.

As I mentioned a moment ago, George’s most significant contributions came as he began questioning popular and widely-held conceptions about ancient Israel, conceptions that still prevail in the minds of most people today. For example, it is still widely assumed that the basis of Israelite solidarity (or group identity) was originally ethnic in nature. [I need to be clear in my pronunciation of that word “ethnic”: if I were to summarize the essence of George’s historical research in one sentence, I would have to say that it has been dedicated to the proposition that, when talking about the nature of early Israel, we need to remove the letter “n” from the word “ethnic” in order to understand the true nature of that community as one based on a religious “ethic.”] But it is still widely assumed that the basis of Israelite solidarity (or group identity) was originally ethNic in nature: that the ancient Israelites were essentially ethnic Jews or Hebrews who all descended from the common ancestor Jacob. Indeed, a literal reading of Genesis supports this view: there Jacob has twelve sons, and each of these sons goes on to become the patriarch of one of twelve “tribes.” It is also widely assumed that these tribes were “nomads” wandering through the desert with their flocks and herds in search of fertile lands in which to settle.
This popular characterization has had some disturbing implications, because in the early chapters of the book of Joshua it yields a horrible picture of divinely-sanctioned genocide. There, we are presented with a deeply offensive image of “ethnic cleansing”, where Hebrews slaughter Canaanites (including women and children) in order to obtain their land and resources, while the God of Israel (the same God Jesus addressed as Father) actively lends divine support. What could possibly be more at odds with the basic tenets of Christian faith?

This popular characterization of the Israelites has colored how Christians view and use the Old Testament. Quite common is the Christian claim that the Israelites indeed might have been a “nationalistic” ethnic group, but the Bible shows us that occasionally some of them, with faith in God, could actually rise above both their dislike of foreigners and their narrow-minded sense that God was, well, their God who was bound to seek their welfare above that of others. Jesus the Savior becomes the Jew who rose above all this Jewish dysfunctionalism and provided a universalizing spiritual corrective. The Old Testament and ancient Israel are then valued by the Church because they provide a compelling picture of what Christianity is not. For good or bad, most people today still subscribe to the popular conception that the early Israelites were ethnically-defined at best and narrowly “tribalistic” at worst. But the important thing to note is that most of us biblical scholars today do not. We no longer subscribe to this popular conception because George Mendenhall has shown us that all this is an historically inaccurate misconception.

George’s misgivings about this popular conception were sharpened in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University in the 1940s, where, under the tutelage of William F. Albright, he studied the major Bronze Age texts unearthed by archaeologists working in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. These texts, in different ways, provided direct and first-hand testimony to ancient Near Eastern cultural phenomena that had analogies in early Israelite culture.

Eager to get a better understanding of the phenomena described in these texts, George became one of the first biblical scholars to apply insights from anthropology. His understanding of these texts was further sharpened by his first-hand encounter with rural village life in the contemporary Arab world: my hunch is that he observed there parallels to small-town life in the American Midwest where he grew up, and he began to suspect that such parallels might have existed also in the world of the biblical past.

The stage was thus set for challenging the popular conception that the early Israelites were an ethnically-defined body of tribalistic nomads. I cannot here list the dozens of specialized articles through which George Mendenhall dismantled
this old misconception “brick-by-brick.” I will simply summarize four developments that have revealed the popular conception to be wrong:

(1) Blood kinship. Mendenhall and others argued that the Genesis story of Jacob physically siring twelve sons and each son, in turn, becoming the biological ancestor of a distinct tribe can no longer be read as literally true. These stories reflect what anthropologists call “fictive kinship.” In these situations, some functioning unity of different groups comes first, and it is often a unity based on common economic interests, shared values and ideology, or perhaps even the perception of a common enemy. Only second comes the symbolic expression of that unity through appeal to a common ancestor. Since real common ancestors rarely exist, a fictional one is “discovered” and everyone’s genealogies are adjusted. So while the Genesis genealogies may not be literally true, they are symbolically true. As far as real blood kinship is involved, the book of Judges suggests that not all the members of the same family were necessarily included within the Israelite community: at some point Gideon seems to have been included in the community while his own father was not. Blood may indeed be thicker than water, but all this suggests that in early Israel some things—such as identification with a religious community—could be thicker even than blood.

(2) The Word “Hebrew.” George Mendenhall showed that the ancient occurrences of the word “Hebrew”—both inside and outside the Bible—do not refer to an ethnic group. Thus, the idea that the Israelites were originally ethnic Hebrews, and that these ethnic Hebrews were the same as ethnic Jews, must be dismissed. Instead, the ancient texts show that the word “Hebrew” was often used as a pejorative to express disdain for people who, for a variety of reasons, no longer felt much loyalty to the prevailing social and political status quo. (One is tempted to see in the modern American “Freemen Movement” out West a contemporary analog, just as one might have seen it in the student protests of the late 1960s.) In 1 Samuel 29 (set in the 11th century BC) the Philistines disparagingly refer to David and his band of followers as “Hebrews”, not because they are ethnically distinct from the Philistines but because they are no longer loyal to their king Saul. The next occurrence of the word in the Bible is in the book of Acts (1st century AD), and by this time the word has indeed taken on the ethnic connotation it still has today—a synonym for “Jews.” But originally there was no such thing as “the Hebrews”, and the word “Hebrew” did not designate any ethnic group.

(3) Ethnicity. (a) George Mendenhall pointed out that early Israelite personal names contain the same general mixture of Semitic and non-Semitic elements as non-Israelite names. (b) He also pointed out evidence that some of the ancient “sea peoples” (which included the Philistines) were circumcised while others were not, as well as evidence that some ancient Israelites were circumcised and others were not. (c) Although we have very few written texts from this early period (1200-
1000 BC), it seems fairly certain that the language of the ancient Israelites at this time was no different from that of non-Israelites. Indeed, the famous “shibboleth” incident described in Judges 12 contains explicit evidence of dialectic diversity within Israel. (d) Archaeologists today are hard-pressed to equate any distinctive elements of material culture exclusively with the Israelites. Thus, if the ancient Israelites were an ethnic group, one would be hard-pressed to prove it from the usual markers of ethnicity such as names, language, body markings, and material artifacts. George argued that the most straightforward solution is to admit that the early Israelites were not a group defined by anything “ethnic.” Indeed, even the biblical statements that a “mixed multitude” of peoples went out of Egypt with Moses support this claim.

(4) Intermarriage (or ethnic in-breeding). From everything said above it should be apparent that endogamy (marriage exclusively within the group), which is often associated with the maintenance and continuity of ethnicity, was not emphasized in early Israel at the time of Moses (1200 BC). Indeed, the available evidence within the Bible itself suggests that it first became a priority at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (a scant 400 years before Christ).

If the OT Israelites were not a distinct and discrete ethnic group of “Hebrews” or Jews, then what held them together? In 1955 George Mendenhall answered this question in his landmark monograph Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East. In it, George made the simple claim that unity in ancient Israel was essentially religious in nature. (One might even be tempted, here in this Lutheran setting, to say that this unity was “confessional” in nature, with the proviso that “confession” here had nothing to do with subscribing to a theological system of dogmas.) Religion was associated simply with the ethical principles familiar to us all as the Ten Commandments. No more and no less.

George reached this conclusion after noticing the remarkable similarities between biblical traditions about the Ten Commandments and the Sinai covenant on the one hand and the international treaties like those of the Hittites, which were probably widely-known at the time of Moses. Just as a Hittite overlord has been gracious to his subjects and then offers to them the policies and principles of his kingship for their sworn acceptance, so Israel’s God Yahweh (or “the Lord”) has been gracious to those he delivered from Egypt and offers to them the principles of his kingship, the Ten Commandments, for their sworn acceptance. God, in effect, becomes the ruling “king” of this new community called “Israel”, for whom His will has ultimate authority. Israel was thus comprised of those individuals, regardless of their background, who accepted the will of God as embodied in the Commandments. The “solidarity” or unity of the community waxed and waned as did the commitments of individual Israelites to these commandments. When enacted, these commandments provided an ethical framework within which
diverse peoples throughout Palestine could live together with some measure of mutual security and satisfaction. And so Israel was born.

Israel was thus not an ethnic group but a religious community or movement: the "kingdom" (or domain) of God. According to George, once we substitute this historically-informed understanding of early Israel in place of the old misconceptions, we can begin to see much more meaningful connections between ancient Israel and early Christianity: after all, according to the gospels the essence of Jesus’ teaching was a refreshing perspective (or “good news”) associated with the re-appearance of the "kingdom of God."

Even though George’s observations about the link between the Sinai covenant and the Hittite treaties has won almost universal endorsement, not everyone has been willing to follow him to what this logically tells us about the nature of Israelite religious community and faith. In this regard his conclusions have frequently encountered sharp (and sometimes hostile) resistance mostly from those who tend narrowly to equate religion with formal ecclesiastical institutions. Given that distorted perspective, these critics have understandably had a difficult time imagining how ecclesiastical institutions can provide a real unity among otherwise diverse peoples. Consistent with a modern, Enlightenment perspective, George’s critics have preferred instead to find Israelite unity rooted in some socio-political structure (since it can no longer be rooted in ethnicity or blood kinship). In their perspective, it is now politics and the systematic wielding of centralized, coercive legal force (such as that which emerged in the days of Israel’s kings)—not internally-held values—that must have eventually unified the Israelites.

Some critics accused George of being naively idealistic. They mistakenly thought that he believed this internalized ethic had somehow supernaturally transformed Israelite souls away from sin. George, of course, believed nothing of the kind. Indeed, no one who reads the terrible stories of Israelite sinfulness in the book of Judges could possibly believe this. What George maintained, however, was that in early Israel the standards used to evaluate the conduct of individuals were the ethical standards of the Ten Commandments. He understood that these transcended the political-legal standards that the powerful everywhere else always use to justify themselves and to manipulate others. What was different in early Israel was not the magnitude or quality of human sinfulness, but the standards used to define and measure that sin.

George was also interested in later periods of biblical history (after 1000 BC), when a critical mass of Israelites themselves opted to reconfigure the old religious community now along monarchic, political lines. Ever the historian, George wanted to explore how the original covenant solidarity fared in later
centuries, and how changing social pressures affected these ancient ethical standards. He noted that later Hebrew kings, priests, and scribes tried to link this Sinai covenant tradition to their developing political, ecclesiastical, and ethnic systems; and in so doing they transformed the covenant tradition and its simple but rigorous ethical standards. The success of their revisions is evident in the persistence of the popular misconception of Israel as an ethnic “nation” preoccupied with ritual. In other words, most people (and also a goodly number of biblical scholars, George would lament) still tend to think about early Israel not as it really was, but as later Hebrew kings, priests, and scribes wanted and imagined it to be.

George felt that the integrity of the early covenant tradition and the ethical standards of its Commandments were kept functionally intact not by the kings, priests, and scribes but by the Hebrew prophets as well as (later) by Jesus and the early Christian movement. A growing number of Old Testament scholars today are inclined to agree with him at least insofar as the prophets are concerned. On the other hand, almost no one has been willing even to engage his claim about the link between early Israel and the New Testament. This is due in part to the sad but silly realities associated with professional specialization: Old Testament historians do not like to dabble in the New Testament, and New Testament scholars likewise prefer to avoid dealing with the ancient Near East and Israelite history.

George Mendenhall’s claim that early Israel was a religious community and not an ethnic group required him to tackle those embarrassing stories of genocide recorded in the book of Joshua. By the early 1960s archaeologists working in the Holy Land had accumulated an impressive array of evidence showing that the traumatic events associated with the end of the Late Bronze Age around 1200 BC (the time of Moses and Joshua) included the destruction of most major urban sites—with some notable exceptions such as Jericho (which George helped excavate in the 1950s). But such ruins can attest only to the fact of destruction, not to the historical process associated with it. Trying to understand the process, George again utilized the written evidence from Late Bronze Age Syria, Turkey, and especially Egypt, evidence that describes shrinking empires, internecine local conflicts, disaffected “Hebrew” groups no longer loyal to the political status quo, the breakdown of order, and roaming gangs of well-armed warriors loyal to no one but themselves.

In 1962 he published a groundbreaking article entitled “The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine.” This relatively brief article has permanently altered the way scholars understand the sudden appearance of Israel in the Promised Land. Ever the iconoclast, and ever the critical historian, George questioned the usual assumption (supported by the book of Joshua) that Israel’s appearance in the Promised Land must be causally linked to the destruction of sites that occurred
around the same time. Indeed, he *separated* the two phenomena and, in a sense, saw them as unrelated. Biblical literalists continue to be unsettled by his conclusion that, contrary to the book of Joshua, only a few “Hebrews” actually entered Palestine from the Sinai wilderness, and that they did so peacefully and without bloodshed, carrying not swords but a novel way of construing the relationship between divine will and ethical conduct. The violence and destruction of sites was probably something the petty kings of Canaan did to themselves as Egyptian power and control began to shrink around 1200 BC. In fact, the archaeological record shows similar destruction at the same time *outside* Canaan in regions claimed by the Hittites, whose empire collapsed also around 1200 BC. (The situation in these ancient regions was therefore probably not unlike what we see today in Bosnia and Chechniya: when the empire retreats or disappears, ambitious local “warlords” rush in to fill the vacuum. As we know from media reports, great violence and destruction usually results.)

George suggested that the bulk of the Israelite population was, therefore, actually indigenous to Palestine, peasants who had grown disillusioned with the increasingly dysfunctional religious and political systems of the pagan world which were now collapsing all around them (i.e., they became “Hebrew”). Those who embraced the ethical principles embedded in the Sinai covenant thereby “became” constituted as a new religious community. In essence, their loyalties were now transferred to their new king, who was not another ambitious politician hungering to control land, people, and resources, but a God who transcended all this and who guaranteed that divine blessings would be showered upon the community which faithfully embraced His Commandments.

Subsequent archaeological research has tended to corroborate George Mendenhall’s claim that the early Israelites were by-and-large simply Canaanites now devoted to the God of Mt. Sinai. A growing number of historians agree that George’s thesis has provided the best *rational* explanation for the destruction of well-fortified sites, as well as for all the similarities and continuities between Israelites and non-Israelites with respect to material culture, personal names, and language. The only significant discontinuity is *religious*: indeed, this is precisely the deeper point made in the bloody but fictional conquest stories of the book of Joshua: the land that once belonged to pagan kings and to their long-suffering subjects now belongs to the Lord God and is enjoyed by the people living under his covenant. [The challenging task confronting the ancient author of the book of Joshua (centuries after the fact) was how to present this “deeper point” in story form while also accounting for the memory that, at this time so long ago, many cities indeed had been destroyed and many people had died. No longer capable of conceiving Israel as an exclusively religious community, and (by default) assuming it to have been a sort of *proto-nation* with an army and a commander-in-chief, this author of the book of Joshua wrote his story depicting
an Israelite army—led jointly by Joshua and God—marching into the land, seizing and destroying cities, and slaughtering entire populations. But today virtually no biblical scholar believes this account to be historically accurate.

In 1973 George published *The Tenth Generation*, a collection of essays and specialized studies held together by an overarching concern to describe the characteristics of this early Israelite religious perspective. This book is energized by Georges belief that *this Israelite perspective urgently commends itself to us today*. During the three times I have read that book, I have come to realize that the early Israelite religious vision possesses this urgency because *it is truly and substantively an integral part of the religious confession that Christians today and in all ages must embrace*. That is what George has been trying to show us for fifty years. And it will continue to be difficult for us to embrace this Israelite confession as long as the dominant misconception remains that it was essentially a narrowly-based *ethnic* confession rather than a potentially transcendent one.

Whenever we Christians cut ourselves off from our connection with this early Israelite perspective, we can at best only proclaim *half a* gospel. Indeed, I suspect that this is precisely what the Church has been doing throughout most of its existence. The historical atrocities done in the name of Christ would have been much less likely to have occurred if the “Hebrew” half of our faith had been active.

What is this “half” that we Christians need in order to make our confession “whole”? What did Israelite faith proclaim so long ago that Christian faith must reclaim as its own? There are dozens of quotes in *Tenth Generation* that answer this question; here is one:

“The starting point of politics is the concern for power, but the whole theme of early biblical history—and a recurrent theme throughout—is the rejection of power. The absolutes have nothing to do with power or politics. The biblical covenant [that constituted the core of Israelite faith] was a systematic proclamation that no [political attempts to maintain and expand control are really ever in control], and [that] any social organization is a secular business that depends entirely upon its demonstrated value to human beings—and its willingness to remain within the [same] ethical bounds to which all members of the community are obligated” (*The Tenth Generation*, p. 195).

This ancient Israelite perspective on the relationship between power and ethic adds substance and urgent relevance to the Christian proclamation of the gospel. It is a perspective that is always needed, and at some moments in history it is *most desperately* needed. Perhaps the most controversial and unnerving aspects of George’s writings has been his insistence that we are now living in such desperate times. George has repeatedly insisted that modern Western
culture is today undergoing the same sort of collapse that recurs periodically—every ten generations or so—in all societies.

This is the point where I wanted to introduce some playful reference to Generation X, that current crop of American young people born in the 1960s and ‘70s on the heels of us “baby-boomers.” “X” is the Roman numeral for “ten.” Five years ago Douglas Coupland wrote a bleak novel entitled *Generation X* depicting “despondent youth devoted to physical frenzy and spiritual numbness moving through an overlit world of low-wage McJobs and high-priced stereos,” unapologetically materialistic in their desire for more money, more power, and more status. Some pundits have referred to them ominously as “the Thirteenth Generation,” while others have referred to them apocalyptically as “the Terminal Generation.”

George would probably be the first to say that numbers like 10 and 13 are irrelevant to the issue at hand, and also to say that focusing on one generation (and a generation that really may not be quite as bad as all the pundits suggest) conveniently glosses over the depth of the real crisis at hand. After all, the real issue is not the character, choices, and fate of today’s youth but of our entire culture. People have always complained about the younger generation, and their complaints have always been right. But the worst indictment we can make of this materialistic and self-seeking Generation X—and the one that is most profoundly true of them as a whole—is that they are indeed our offspring, products of our culture. Study them too closely, and you will see clear reflections of ourselves. What is the future that we will bequeath to them? Ask them, and they will tell you: None. The End.

In the two decades following the publication of *The Tenth Generation* numerous thinkers have independently reached the same conclusion that George reached about the current demise of our culture. For example, it has become commonplace in academic circles these days to speak of the post-Enlightenment Age or the post-Modern Era. These labels seems to signal a growing awareness that something fundamental to Western culture is drawing to a close here at the end of the 20th century. That something is the so-called “Enlightenment” or “Modernity.” Of course, future generations will correctly reserve for themselves the right to pass judgment on how “enlightened” we really were, and how arrogant it was for us to label ourselves “modern.” They may choose to re-label that period of Western culture between 1600 and 2000 as “The Foolish Age,” and from their perspective the 19th and 20th centuries in particular may not appear so modern but rather quite primitive.

We can perhaps appreciate the significance of our current cultural crisis if we analyze it in terms of the relationship between knowledge on the one hand and
the reality of God on the other (and here I readily admit that my analysis is superficial and grossly oversimplified). Medieval folk, and indeed all pre-moderns throughout history before them, said that along with belief in God--i.e., with some stipulations up front that certain things are transcendent--there comes reliable knowledge. Given the purposefulness of ultimate accountability, things take on relative value. When the Sacred is identified and acknowledged, right and wrong become clear.

The Enlightenment enterprise properly attacked the abuses that accompanied this medieval worldview, when institutionalized religion became an oppressive and dehumanizing force. The Enlightenment could be summarized as “the attempt to sever knowledge from the reality of God and to assert that knowledge can be held entirely within the structures of human rationality.” God could then be disposed of, which is another way of saying that secularism became a chief characteristic of the Modern Era.

And today we need “post-moderns”--such as “deconstructionists”--to show us where it all reaches fulfillment and ends: there is no God, and consequently there is no knowledge; there is no ultimate accountability, and consequently there is no value; there is no Sacred, and consequently there is no right and wrong. There is only the “Been there, done that” boredom of Beavis and Butthead. True children of our age. Generation X.

After ten generations--reckoning a biblical 40 years per generation--the Enlightenment Age is over. The Modern Era--with its historically brief flirtations with materialism, secularism, and humanism--has lost its hold over us; it no longer does what culture is supposed to do--help us make sense of our existence. This major cultural “meltdown” has triggered collapse in most of our basic social institutions, from the family, to the neighborhood, to the schools, to the government, and beyond. The solitary question that remains as we watch the old order and organizations thrashing about to survive is a question that reduces us to the level of the frightened child: “Will it hurt?” Will this collapse be violent, or more violent than it has already become? How many of us human beings will perish with it? The question is entirely appropriate, because the technological tools of control and of violence today have far more devastation-power than the iron swords and spearheads that so terrorized the diverse peoples of Palestine at the end of the Bronze Age.

When enacted, the covenant tradition of ancient Israel provided an ethical framework within which those diverse peoples throughout Palestine could begin to live together with some measure of mutual security and satisfaction. And it can also do so for us. This is “good news” that our culture, in its misguided and failed attempts to address the issue of unity and diversity, so desperately needs to hear.
Unfortunately, roaming the horizons of our culture are powerful interest groups across the political spectrum who want to legislate all this by force, with themselves or their benefactors, of course, occupying the important positions of control. Many of them will not be happy to find the problem being fixed without them by a grassroots movement of diverse people like you and me who are loyal not to them (to them we are “Hebrew”!) but to a Lord who says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And together we may have to stand up with courage and make our witness in the face of their beastly roars. Yet this was precisely the role of ancient Israel, and it is what the Holy Spirit continually calls the Church to be. (God forbid that future generations characterize us as another ethnic group!)

George’s lifelong labors with the Bible as both historian and child of Israel remind us that historical endings are also new historical starting points. He reminds us that ours is a tremendously demanding age in which to be alive and to be God’s people committed to a transcendent vision of righteousness. From here on out, every moment is potentially a decisive and defining moment; and from this moment on, every choice is potentially a high-stakes choice fraught with ultimate significance for the future. Ours is therefore also a tremendously exciting age in which to live. As the temporal kingdoms wither and collapse around us, let us find comfort and purpose in the vision of ancient Israel and in our identification with it. This is nothing less than the “refreshing perspective” (or “gospel”) that Jesus himself proclaimed when he said: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Turn around, and believe in this good news.”

It is not required of all Mendenhall students that they conclude their formal presentations with a reference to “the kingdom of God.” But I have, and I guess I will always be a George Mendenhall student. Consequently, I hope these remarks have met with his approval. I also hope they have been helpful to each of you in your respective struggles with issues of life and faith. All of us need clarity, courage, and hope; and whether you know it or not, I dare say that in this struggle you (like me) are indebted to the work and the witness of this wise and committed gentleman.

As for myself, I know that I could not appreciate such issues, speak such words, or even think such thoughts as I have here expressed this evening if it were not for the impact that George Mendenhall has had—both as a rigorous historian and as a devoted Christian—in providing clarity where so much confusion now seems to reign.

I also know that at the end of presentations such as this etiquette demands that audiences applaud at least politely—assuming that they have not been sufficiently bored or offended by the speaker’s remarks. But the proper focus of this evening’s activities is George Mendenhall, and there have been many times--
lonely ones, I suspect—when he spoke an urgent word of truth that otherwise polite and decent people preferred not to hear, chose not to applaud, and sometimes ruthlessly tried to suppress. One detractor once said of George, “He thinks he is Jeremiah.” To which I will now respond, “What if he is?”

When George has spoken the truth, he has indeed spoken the prophetic word of God, which is always relevant and rarely congenial. And when he has spoken for God, I hope that he has spoken not just to us but for us as well.

On behalf of those assembled here, I want to thank you, George, for your dedication, courage, and faith in proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom and its righteousness for which our Age so desperately hungers and thirsts.