

“Where the Spirit is...”: François Bovon Preceded Us

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Five o'clock p.m., an autumn day in 2003: the doctoral seminar of the New Testament and Early Christianity program at Harvard Divinity School is almost concluded. With some urgency apparent in his voice, Professor François Bovon is closing the lesson: in less than two hours, we are invited to his home to celebrate the new academic year. Perfectly organized, at 7 p.m., he welcomes about forty people into his home, with a fine dinner he had prepared waiting for us. Truly a man of many talents, he was then, as so often, able to surprise and delight by excelling in so many ways: an internationally recognized scholar, a gracious host, an accomplished and beloved teacher.

Appointed Professor of New Testament in Geneva in 1967, he moved to the United States in 1993 to become the *Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion* at Harvard Divinity School, where he remained until his retirement in 2010. After receiving an M.Div. at Lausanne, he took his Ph.D. in 1965 *summa cum laude* at the University in Basel (Oscar Cullmann, supervisor), writing his dissertation on the reception of Acts 10-11 during the first six centuries CE. Throughout his career, he studied the New Testament as it was read, re-read, adapted, and rewritten by early Christians. This work culminated in 2009 in a four-volume French commentary on the Gospel of Luke, which has been translated into German, English, Italian, and Spanish. Putting into practice the Pauline adage “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Co 3,17), he also opened up and explored content for French speaking researchers by focusing attention on the study of Christian apocryphal texts. In 1981, he created a community of researchers under the label of AELAC (Association for the Study of Christian Apocryphal Literature) that led him to edit the first volume of the corpus of Christian apocryphal texts for the famous French collection *La Pléiade*, and to search ceaselessly for new manuscripts. Everyone who has met François Bovon knows that nothing could put a joyful gleam in his eye more than the prospect of a new manuscript on Stephen or some other as-yet unstudied Christian story lying neglected in a monastery. Such passion brought him many well-deserved scholarly distinctions. He served as President of *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*, the *Association pour l'Étude de la Littérature Apocryphe Chrétienne*, and the *Société suisse de théologie*. He received an honorary degree from the University of Uppsala, as well as numerous other awards and marks of distinguished service, including editor of *The Harvard Theological Review*.

The academic quality and variety of his extensive list of publications were based on strict discipline, whether laboring in his flat in Cambridge (Massachusetts) or in his Swiss chalet in St-Luc, though his characteristic modesty meant that he rarely mentioned his accomplishments or hard work. This natural reserve was one source of his openness and generosity to the needs and concerns of others. If students had new ideas or interests, they were sure to find in such a mentor all the advice and encouragement needed to advance in their own direction. Exercising his own intellectual curiosity and freedom, he was led by his study of the little-known treasures of the Christian tradition to propose a new category of texts. Beyond canon and heresy, he identified a group of those that had been important to Christians for centuries: “texts useful for the soul” (*psuchofeles*). He dared to explore pathways outside of the Bible, because he was quietly and deeply rooted in a reformed biblical spirituality. On November 1, 2013, he preceded us in entering the *communio sanctorum*, after having led us to see the heights of research in early Christian literature, history, and theology.