

George Mendenhall, biblical studies scholar, dies at 99

by [Christian Century staff](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue

George Emery Mendenhall, who made pioneering contributions to the field of biblical studies, died August 5 at age 99 at his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Mendenhall was [professor of ancient and biblical studies at the University of Michigan](#) from 1952 until his retirement in 1986.

“Many pastors and theologians were introduced to covenant through George Mendenhall’s description of covenant as a treaty between conquering kings and vassals,” William Johnson Everett [wrote in the *Christian Century* in 1999](#).

However, Everett noted that the “model tended to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies of command as privileged paradigms of divine-human and human-human relationships.” Recent research instead revealed “the rich variety of covenants in biblical life, all of which contain a strain of negotiation and consent.”

The University of Michigan’s regents praised Mendenhall for his “pioneering multidisciplinary research, which combined linguistics, sociology, and archaeology,” according to the Faculty History Project. They also called his 1955 book *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* and his 1973 book *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* “milestones of biblical studies.”

Among the arguments he set forth in works, according to his obituary, were that “the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus had the same form and structure as the contemporary international Hittite treaties” and that “the genocide depicted in the book of Joshua was largely a later fiction created for purposes of political propaganda.”

Mendenhall was a consulting editor of the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, and lectured internationally, including in England and South Africa and at St. Catherine’s Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt.

He earned degrees from Western Theological Seminary in Fremont, Nebraska; Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; and Johns Hopkins University in Maryland. He was ordained in 1942 in the United Lutheran Church in

America, a predecessor to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.