

Biblical scholar Cain Hope Felder dies at 76

People in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue

Cain Hope Felder, whose scholarship challenged Eurocentric interpretations of the Bible, died of cancer October 1 in Mobile, Alabama. He was 76.

A native of Aiken, South Carolina, Felder grew up in segregated Boston neighborhoods. He spent 35 years teaching at his alma mater, Howard University, reaching generations of church leaders. He also spent years arguing that the United Methodist Church needed to uproot itself from racial discrimination. After retiring, he left the denomination over the issue.

From 1969 to 1972, Felder was a presence in the civil rights movement as the first executive director of Black Methodists for Church Renewal, a caucus within the UMC.

Felder graduated in 1966 from Howard, a historically black university, where he studied philosophy, Greek, and Latin. He earned a master's degree in divinity from Union Theological Seminary; a PhD and an MPhil in biblical languages and literature from Columbia University; and a diploma of theology from Mansfield College at the University of Oxford in England.

Felder taught at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1978 to 1981, then returned to Howard, where he spent the rest of his academic career. Many who admired Felder for his books and teaching weren't aware of his work during the civil rights movement, said Bishop Woodie W. White, bishop in residence at Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

Felder was able to negotiate church politics and reach out successfully to young Black Power activists at the same time, which showed remarkable grace and acuity at a young age, White said.

Felder was the editor of *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* (1993), which highlighted Africans in the biblical world and text. He expanded biblical maps to show the entire African continent and not just the tiny sliver of Egypt and Ethiopia included in other editions of the Bible, said Cheryl J. Sanders, professor of Christian ethics at Howard.

Felder's research showed that scriptures contain ethnic diversity that has been downplayed. He also pointed out that as a Middle Eastern Jew, Jesus—while not black—would not have been considered Caucasian by today's standards.

In his book *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (1991), Felder wrote: "I hope to clarify, for modern readers, the profound differences in racial attitudes between those in the biblical world and in the subsequent history of Eurocentric interpretation. . . . The Bible contains no narratives in which the original intent was to negate the full humanity of black people or view blacks in an unfavorable way."

A book by Felder published in 1989, *Troubling Biblical Waters*, and the national promotion campaign that followed, was paramount in getting Felder's ideas to a larger audience, according to Sanders. Felder's "fierce and edgy" approach to Afrocentric biblical studies will be long remembered, she said.

After he retired and accepted emeritus status from Howard in 2016, Felder left the United Methodist Church and became an elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. —United Methodist News