

Emeritus Professor Elaine Mary Wainwright rsm
25 August 1948 – 5 July 2024

It was with great sadness and deep appreciation that many hundreds of people, in person and online, remembered and farewelled internationally renowned biblical scholar Emeritus Professor (Sr) Elaine Mary Wainwright rsm on Friday 12 July 2024 at Holy Trinity Church in Banyo, Queensland. Based in Oceania, Elaine was widely known for her excellence in scholarly research and teaching, and her wonderful generosity as a colleague, teacher, mentor and friend to many, especially in Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Pasifika. Principally a Matthean scholar, her work focused on feminist, ecological and post-colonial approaches as they informed and shaped the socio-rhetorical methodology she favoured.

The concept of habitat which became a keynote of and interpretive key in her later work had roots in her early life. Elaine was born and brought up near Toowoomba, Queensland, where her parents Tom and Kath ran a dairy farm 'Ivanhoe'. She felt that her early days on the farm brought her close to the earth, and this relationship with land, and later sea, resonated in her scholarship. Educated in a Roman Catholic tradition, Elaine trained as a commercial teacher and taught at a state high school prior to joining the Sisters of Mercy in Brisbane in 1968. After starting work in 1975 with young women interested in joining the Sisters, she became keenly interested in studies in religion and theology. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with Honours from the University of Queensland in 1980, gained a Master of Arts in Theology at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, in 1985, an *Élève Diplômé* from the *École Biblique de Jérusalem* in 1986 and BSS at Pontifical Biblical Commission, Rome, also in 1986. In 1990 she completed her Doctorate through the University of Queensland. The doctorate was subsequently published as *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel of Matthew* (de Gruyter, 1991).

She published three further monographs, *Shall We Look for Another: A Feminist Re-reading of the Matthean Jesus* (Orbis, 1998); *Woman Healing/Healing Women: The Genderization of Healing in Early Christianity* (Equinox, 2006); *Habitat, Human and Holy: An Eco-Rhetorical Reading of the Gospel of Matthew* (Earth Bible Commentary, 6; Sheffield Phoenix, 2016), and with Robert J. Myles and Carlos Olivares, *The Gospel according to Matthew: The Basileia of the Heavens is near at Hand* (Phoenix Guides to New Testament, 1; Sheffield Phoenix, 2014). She coedited important volumes in social and ecological contextual theologies and hermeneutics, including: *Eco-Theology* (co-edited with Luiz Carlos Susin and Felix Wilfred), *Concilium* (2009/3); *Oceania and Indigenous Theologies* (co-edited with Diego Irarrazaval and Dennis Gira) *Concilium* (2010/5); *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter* (co-edited with Philip Culbertson; Brill 2011; SBL 2010); *Human Trafficking* (co-edited with Hille Haker and Lisa Sowle Cahill) *Concilium* (2011/3); *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania* (co-edited with Jione Havea and David J Neville; SBL 2014).

Elaine authored over 70 scholarly articles and book chapters and wrote and presented a great many other pieces for more general audiences. The titles of her books, articles and presentations show a movement from feminist hermeneutics to the development of a multidimensional framework that has much in common with contemporary intersectional approaches. Not only did Elaine continue to expand her scholarly thinking, but she generously welcomed critique from colleagues, students and those she mentored, humbly rethinking aspects of her work, for example, in relation to first-century Judaism and the Jesus movement,

and with regard to the ongoing and unsought privilege of living and working on unceded First Nations lands.

After lecturing in New Testament in Queensland from 1982 to 2001 at Pius XII Seminary/St Paul's Theological College and Brisbane College of Theology, Elaine accepted the position of Head and Maclaurin-Goodfellow Professor of Theology in the newly formed School of Theology at the University of Auckland, a position she held from 2003 to 2014. Her former students remember her as having a 'transformative impact' on their lives. Colleague Nick Thompson writes: 'Elaine was an indefatigable and effective administrator, but never let bureaucratic processes get in the way of patience, kindness and care towards her colleagues and the students who passed through the school'. Students of Elaine, especially those whose research she supervised, count themselves fortunate to have had the mentorship of this exceptional woman and scholar.

Beyond and informing her teaching and research in Australia and Aotearoa, Elaine was widely involved in the international academy of biblical scholars. She served as president of the Society of Asian Biblical Studies (SABS), formed in 2006 after the International SBL meeting in Singapore 2005, and was remembered with respect and gratitude at the SABS conference in July 2024. Elaine was a strong supporter and contributor to the Oceania Biblical Studies Association from its outset, with the University of Auckland hosting its meeting in 2010, to consider 'Climate Change in Oceania: Biblical and Theological Responses'. Over her years in Auckland, she appreciated mentoring, supervising and learning from many Pasifika research students and colleagues.

Internationally, Elaine lectured at the Centre for Biblical Formation, Ecce Homo, Jerusalem and Maryknoll Summer Institute, Maryknoll, New York, and was a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge, Mass., held a Catholic Biblical Association of America Visiting Professorship at the École Biblique, Jerusalem, and was a visiting professor at Trinity College, Dublin. She gave short courses and guest lectures in many places from the US to Hong Kong. Elaine was an active member of Society of Biblical Literature, The Catholic Biblical Association of America, The Society for New Testament Studies, as well as Australian Catholic Biblical Association. Among her contributions to SBL, she led in hosting the SBL International Meeting in Auckland in 2008, and served on the SBL Travel Grants Awards selection committee for the Asia and Pacific region.

From the 1990s, Elaine actively championed local feminist grassroots and scholarly organisations, including WomenChurch and Women Scholars of Religion and Theology (WSRT) and its journal *SeaChanges*. Kathleen McPhillips writes that the association WSRT 'was made possible by the leadership of Elaine Wainwright and her vision for a community of women scholars supporting one another across the diverse cultures of the Pacific region'. On her death Elaine was also remembered by members of the US-based WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual) of whose annual meetings she was a regular attendee. She was a notable early supporter of the Earth Bible Project initiated under the leadership of Norman Habel in Adelaide, South Australia, in the 1990s, contributing to the early volumes and served as a chairperson for the Ecological Hermeneutics Section at the SBL Annual and International Meetings. She was a member of and contributor to the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar which met annually in Australia and Aotearoa.

Exemplifying her collegial generosity, Elaine bought her gifts of close reading to books that she launched; she was brilliant at 'getting inside' those books, understanding and affirming the

intent of the author. Then, in 2024 a book was launched to honour her. Former students and colleagues Robert J Myles, Caroline Blyth and Emily Colgan organised and edited, *Habitats of the Basileia: Essays in Honour of Elaine M Wainwright*, published by Sheffield Phoenix Press and launched by Monica Melanchthon, current president of SABS, in April 2024. In order to be accessible to as many contributors, friends, family and community of Elaine as possible, this was an online launch, and Elaine was able to attend and speak briefly. She was deeply pleased that the essays in the book honouring her work were also strong scholarly contributions in their own right.

After her time at University of Auckland, Elaine took up a further leadership position within her religious community, as Leader of the Mission and Ministry Team of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, where she exercised her passion for justice while continuing her research in Matthean studies and ecological hermeneutics from which her Earth Bible commentary, *Habitat, Human and Holy: An Eco-Rhetorical Reading of the Gospel of Matthew* emerged in 2016. The commentary was the focus of a review session at SBL that year. ATF Press is currently preparing a selection of Elaine Wainwright's articles for publication in 2025/2026.

Sadly, her final years were marked by illness, and she regretted becoming unable to continue the research and teaching she loved. Elaine continued to enjoy conversations on biblical literature, ecological feminist hermeneutics, social justice and current affairs until her final days. She was a loved and deeply committed member of the Sisters of Mercy Australia and Papua New Guinea and a much loved and admired daughter, sister, aunt and great aunt to her extended family. She died peacefully on 5 July 2024 surrounded by family, community and friends and was buried with her Mercy sisters in Nudgee, Queensland. At her funeral, keynotes of the eulogies were her care for others, her passion for ecological and social justice, her enthusiasm for her work, and her kindness.

Emily Colgan
Anne Elvey
Jione Havea
Anita Munro
Kathleen P Rushton

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