

IN MEMORIAM:
FERDINAND ETIENNE DEIST
9.8.1944 - 12.7.1997

This issue of "Scriptura" is dedicated to the memory of Ferdinand Deist, scholar, colleague and friend. Ferdinand, among his many activities, was an active contributor to the annual workshop on Contextual Hermeneutics in Stellenbosch. His article in this issue was the last contribution to the group. The rest of the issue contains articles from other members of the group.

The loss of the irreplaceable Ferdinand Deist touches so many people because in his person many different worlds came together in a unique manner. With the exception of his immediate family, those most deeply affected by his untimely death are people, both in this country and far beyond its shores - who knew and admired Ferdinand as a scholar, teacher, author, spiritual guide, colleague and loyal friend.

Ferdinand Deist was born on the 9th of August 1944 in the district of Piketberg. He matriculated from Citrusdal High School, studied at Stellenbosch and Marburg, received all his degrees with distinction and completed his doctoral studies with Charles Fensham as supervisor in 1971. He started his academic career in 1973 at the University of Port Elizabeth, before moving on to the University of South Africa where he was promoted to the Chair in Old Testament studies in 1980. He became senior professor in 1989 and served as vice-dean of the Faculty of Theology. In 1992 he became head of the department of Old Near Eastern Studies at the University of Stellenbosch.

As a researcher, his work soon drew national and international attention. His innovative ideas and his willingness to explore new directions often brought him into conflict with established theological and ecclesiastical positions. His productivity was truly remarkable.

With more than 80 journal articles, 30 chapters in books and nine scholarly monographs, he made a substantial contribution to the body of scholarly knowledge. The many invitations as visiting lecturer or research fellow from universities abroad, attested to the international recognition he enjoyed. He received prestigious awards and research grants - notably from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation - and was on sabbatical in Heidelberg at the time of his untimely death. He was an active member of several professional societies.

He was an exceptional teacher. Through his characteristic interactive style, he encouraged, guided and inspired literally thousands of students through his lectures and publications. Seventeen doctoral students completed their dissertations under his supervision.

He had established himself also as writer of non-theological literature. His natural talent was shaped and coloured by the environment of his youth: the world of the great story-tellers of the North-West Boland. Their typical narrative style and the earthiness of their language can be heard in the stories that Ferdinand himself wrote with so much gusto, humour and respect for human life.

Perhaps his greatest contribution is to be found in the way he succeeded in relating scholarly research to the spiritual needs of people from all walks of life. Ferdinand had a deep dislike of all scholarly pretentiousness and academic mystification. With typical directness and disarming honesty, he made complex theological issues and difficult existential questions accessible to a wide spectrum of people. Evidence of his own existential struggle with these questions was unmistakable. Because of his determination to dig deeper, he was able to make a major contribution to the dialogue between faith and science. He especially gained the respect of people who undergo intellectual difficulties in these matters. He took the questions of science seriously and did not try to get by with easy answers. For thousands looking for spiritual guidance in a post-modern world, he provided direction and support. He articulated what they already suspected, and he spoke to their needs in a way not often witnessed before. The very wide readership of his regular column in the daily press and of his more than thirty popular books made evident his influence in this regard. Because he himself often had serious difficulties mediating the theological and ecclesiastical traditions from which he came, he gained the trust and confidence of others who had similar experiences.

*His contribution towards reconciling individuals and groups long before political liberation became a reality in this country, is a tale that still has to be told. His little book *Sorry Sam* provides a small glimpse of his role in this respect. His response to the difficult challenges of a society in transition was to develop constructive new ways of doing things. The reorganisation of his department, the founding of the Centre for Bible Translation in Africa and the M.Phil. in Bible Skills are but a few examples of such initiatives. This he did in a down-to-earth manner and with an irrepressible humour that helped him to negotiate often difficult and tense situations. The esteem he commanded from others was a direct response to the deeply rooted respect he had for every person, and to his ability to make other people believe in themselves.*

For the work group on Contextual Hermeneutics, Ferdinand was far more than a highly regarded colleague: he was a friend who enriched our lives and who made our common quest a meaningful and rewarding enterprise.

Bernard Lategan