Harris, James Rendel (1852-1941), biblical scholar and palaeographer, was born in Plymouth on 27 January 1852, the second son of Henry Marmaduke Harris, a house decorator, and his wife, Elizabeth Carter, née Budd. Educated at Plymouth grammar school, he entered Clare College, Cambridge on 9 June 1870, where he was a scholar and was deeply influenced by the teaching of F. J. A. Hort. He graduated BA and third wrangler in 1874 and proceeded MA in 1877.

Elected a fellow of Clare College in 1875, Harris was mathematical lecturer there until 1882, when he was appointed to teach New Testament Greek at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Here he began his long series of works on early Christian documents, whose originality and learning assured for him a place at the forefront of New Testament studies. He had converted from Congregationalism to the Society of Friends in 1880, partly under the influence of the mystic Madame Guyan and the second evangelical revival, but mainly owing to his marriage in that year to Helen, née Balkwill (d. 1914), a Quaker, also from Plymouth. Harris was soon in difficulties at Johns Hopkins through his denunciations of vivisection, and he then accepted an invitation to join the Quaker University of Haverford College, Pennsylvania, where he was professor of biblical languages and literature from 1885 to 1892. His first publication, *The Teaching of the Apostles and the Sibylline Books*, appeared in 1885 and was followed in 1887 by his essay, *The Origin of the Leicester Codex*.

On his first visit to the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai in 1889, Harris came across the Syriac version of the lost Apology of Aristides. This was published in 1891 and in the same year his study of the Codex Bezae appeared in print. He called for a revaluation of the western text, asserting that modern textual critics had overstated their case; Hort, although impressed with his former student’s find, felt that his theoretical gifts were rather limited, and that his arguments did not take a sufficiently broad analytical view of the evidence.

In 1893 Harris returned to Cambridge as lecturer in palaeography. Specialist studies followed in quick succession, among them *The Origin of the Ferrar Group* (1893), *Stichometry* (1893), and *Hermas in Arcadia* (1896). In 1893 he again visited Mount Sinai to assist Agnes Lewis and her sister in deciphering the Sinai Palimpsest. In 1896 he and his wife spent six months organizing relief for Armenian refugees in Asia Minor and publicized their plight in *Letters from the Scenes of the Recent Massacres in Armenia* (1897). In 1912, during the Balkan War, he again took up the cause of the Armenians, travelling to Constantinople to attempt to help to influence their fate.

In 1903 Harris was invited to become professor of early Christian literature and New Testament exegesis at the University of Leiden, but he chose instead to become the first director of studies of Woodbrooke, a Quaker settlement for religious and social study in Selby Oak, Birmingham. Addresses belonging to his early
Cambridge period were published as *Memoranda sacra* in 1892; some delivered after his return appeared in *Union with God* (1895); and many addresses given at Woodbrooke were published in *The Guiding Hand of God* (1905) and in later volumes. In 1909 Harris discovered in one of his manuscripts a Syriac version of the lost *Odes of Solomon*, a find which rivalled in interest that of the *Apology of Aristides*. A last visit to the Middle East and Mount Sinai in 1922-3 did not result in any great discovery, but Harris acquired some papyri in Egypt of which a selection was edited by J. Enoch Powell and published as *The Rendel Harris Papyri* (1936).

During the First World War Harris had two narrow escapes from drowning. He was sailing to join his friend J. H. Moulton in India, when his ship was torpedoed. Again, on the return voyage, his boat was torpedoed and Moulton died from exposure. Having survived the war, in 1918 Harris was appointed curator of eastern manuscripts at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, where he studied folklore. Before leaving Cambridge in 1903 he had lectured on the Dioscuri in Christian legend. He had become interested in twin-lore and became more radical in his speculations. At Woodbrooke he had written *Boanerges* (1913), which argued that there was more than one pair of twins among the apostles. At Rylands he also produced many studies of the origins of Greek gods. His research into early Christian controversies with Jews over the use of passages from the Old Testament resulted in two books, entitled *Testimonies* (1916 and 1920), in which Vacher Burch collaborated. The tercentenary in 1920 of the sailing of the Pilgrim Fathers to America on the *Mayflower* also led Harris to advance the theory that the barn at Jordans, next to the Friends' meeting-house there, was built from the timbers of the ship.

In 1925 Harris retired, his sight beginning to fail him, to Birmingham, where he became interested in tracing the spread of Egyptian culture in the millennia before Christ. During his career he had received the honorary degrees of LittD from Dublin (1892), of LLD from Haverford (1900) and Birmingham (1909), of DTheol from Leiden (1909), and of DD from Glasgow (1914). He was an honorary fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, from 1909, and was elected FBA in 1927. He was a leader among free churchmen and was president of the National Free Church Council in 1907–8. Harris died at his home, 2 King's Mead Close, Selly Oak, Birmingham, on 1 March 1941.


**Sources**  The Times (3 March 1941), 7 · *The Friend* (7 March 1941) · Venn, Alum. Cant. · WWW, 1941 50 · Allibone, Dict.

**Archives**  priv. coll. · U. Birm., Orchard Learning Resources Centre, corresp. and papers · Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham, papers · Bodl. Oxf., corresp. with Gilbert Murray · JRL, letters to J. H. Moulton · NL Scot., corresp. with publishers
**Likenesses**  P. Bigland, portrait, Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham
· J. Russell & Sons, photograph, NPG · photograph, repro. in *The Times*

**Wealth at death**  £1514 19s. 0d.: probate, 5 April 1941, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*