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F. F. BRUCE AS A BIBLICAL SCHOLAR

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To attempt to assess the value of a scholar's work during his life-time is a vain task; only the passage of time can show what was of lasting merit in his achievements. The venture is even more hazardous when it is undertaken by one who closely shares the outlook of his subject and has derived more scholarly inspiration from him than from anybody else. Objectivity can hardly be expected in the present article. The best that can be expected is a catalogue of works with some indication of their contemporary significance for scholarship.

In the case of F. F. Bruce the most striking superficial feature is the sheer range of the material to be taken into consideration. His immense productivity is demonstrated by the lengthy bibliography which appears in the recently published *Festschrift* in his honour and its supplement elsewhere in this *Journal*. Nor should it be forgotten that this rich output nearly all stems from a period of twenty-five years (in his earlier life Bruce was primarily a Classicist), during which he has carried out much other literary activity (the reading and correcting of manuscripts, especially that of G. W. Bromiley's translation of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*), undertaken the varied tasks of university teaching and departmental administration, and spoken frequently at meetings and conferences of all kinds.

Not only so, but the range of interest revealed in this work is wide and varied. In these days most men find it difficult enough to show competence in one aspect of biblical scholarship. But Bruce's competence ranges over the whole breadth of New Testament studies, and there is scarcely an aspect of the New Testament on which he has not had a worthwhile contribution to make. He is particularly well-acquainted with the background of the New Testament, both its Jewish background including the Dead Sea Scrolls (on which he is an acknowledged expert) and its Gentile background in the Graeco-Roman world. The title of the present essay reminds us that his interest is not confined to the New Testament and what is of immediate relevance to its understanding; in his earlier writings in particular, Bruce has demonstrated his expertise in Old Testament history and archaeology, and it is an indication of his continuing interest in the Old Testament and of the respect in which he is held by other scholars that he was elected President of the Society for Old Testament Study in 1965.

It is beyond the present writer's competence to follow Bruce in all these activities, and in what follows our interest will be largely confined to his New Testament studies.

A couple of formal features of his scholarship may be noted before we look at its contents. First, Bruce is one of the best popularisers of biblical scholarship, expressing himself in simple terms for the benefit of a wide public. There is sometimes a certain scholarly haughtiness towards so-

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called popularisers, and the impression is fomented that what they are doing is not real scholarship. One rather suspects that those who criticise in this fashion are like the fox in Aesop's fable: unable to write well at a popular level themselves, they pour scorn on those who can. But it must be forcefully urged that writing for a popular audience is an important aspect of scholarship. Far too often we hear accusations that the pulpit is fifty years behind the teacher's rostrum, and the pew even further out-of-date; some of the blame for this situation undoubtedly rests on a scholarship which does not trouble to communicate with both pulpit and pew. It is all to the credit of men like Bruce—and W. Barclay and A. M. Hunter—that the findings of New Testament scholarship are easily accessible today. In any case, to write at a popular level is not inconsistent with a truly scholarly approach, and it may be argued that the test of a man's scholarship is whether he is capable of expressing his arguments and conclusions in a manner that is generally intelligible. That the more popular works of Bruce represent the fruit of worthy scholarly labours is proved beyond cavil by the fact that even the advanced scholar will find profitable material in them. Bruce's work is in no danger of being confused with that of the populariser whose work is second-hand and cheap.

Secondly, at whatever level he is writing Bruce expresses himself with superb clarity and ease. His work is a delight to read, so smoothly does it flow. He is never guilty of obscurity, and he is a master of the apt phrase. All this is the mark of a writer who has carefully thought out what he wants to say and is thus able to express it neatly and unequivocally. Here is something worthy of praise in an age when dullness, and even vagueness and obscurity, sometimes seem to be the hallmarks of scholarship. It would be invidious (but not difficult) to cite examples of this regrettable tendency; it suffices to say that Bruce cannot be accused of it.

Finally, it is important to note that it is principally through Bruce's work that conservative evangelical scholarship has won a place for itself in the world of modern biblical scholarship. One is naturally not unmindful of the many important contributions made by other evangelicals, especially those who held faithfully to this position during the lean years before the Second World War but whose stand attracted little attention outside their own constituency; but it may be suggested that the decisive date in the revival of evangelical scholarship and in its recognition by other scholars—at least in Great Britain—was 1951, the year of publication of F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*.

Prior to this date there had been little in the way of first-class evangelical scholarship in this country since the turn of the century. The prevailing theological climate was that of liberalism which looked at the Bible from an essentially human point of view and seemed at times almost to delight in a form of criticism which destroyed the trustworthiness of the Bible, as far as the historical facts in it were concerned, and which consequently found itself spiritually bankrupt through its inability to hear the voice of divine revelation in it. Admittedly, many whose religious experience forbade them from denying the inspiration of the Bible managed to come to terms with biblical criticism by adopting some species of Barthianism in which a fallible book was regarded as capable of becoming the vehicle of a divine

message; but any suggestion that the Bible might be historically and spiritually trustworthy after all was dismissed as 'fundamentalism', an unthinking, uncritical attitude inherited from the past and no longer capable of defence in the twentieth century.

In this situation little was done by the so-called fundamentalists to justify their position against the criticisms of their opponents, and no doubt some of them would have argued that scholarly justification of their position was out of place: 'The natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit, and so it is no use arguing with him about the nature of the Bible'. Others were content to appeal to the scholarship of an earlier day, unaware that in important respects the scene of battle had shifted. In any case, there were few with the intellectual equipment to defend their position.

If the situation has now changed, it is due in considerable measure to the work of F. F. Bruce, whose writings have expressed a scholarly and evangelical position which may be rejected by its opponents but which certainly cannot be ignored on the grounds that it is unscientific.

What are the characteristics of this approach? In the first place, Bruce brought to his biblical studies the background of a sound training in the Latin and Greek Classics and several years of experience in research and teaching in a university setting. This meant that he was familiar with the principles and methods utilised in the study of ancient literature, in particular the literature of the Hellenistic world which formed the environment of the New Testament. He was able to approach the New Testament from the standpoint of one who knew how to evaluate Greek literature and what to expect from it. This meant that he could study the New Testament 'like any other book' and was not hindered by theological prejudice (whether conservative or radical) from a dispassionate examination of its contents.

Bruce thus found himself in that group of Classicists who have directed their attention to the New Testament and reached a positive verdict on its historical worth. It is surely no coincidence that Bruce did his early classical training in the University of Aberdeen where Sir William Ramsay had once taught Humanity (as we rightly persist in naming the Chair elsewhere called Latin!) and where in Bruce's own time Alexander Souter was Ramsay's successor. It is true of course that Bruce had no need to undergo a conversion like that of Ramsay from a negative estimate of the historicity of the New Testament to a positive one, but this is no reason to regard his position as any the less objective. It is as fatuous to dismiss Bruce's work on the grounds that in his case scholarship buttressed an already existing faith as it is to criticise Ramsay for showing the over-enthusiasm of the new convert. The work of both men is to be judged by its quality and not by irrelevant psychological considerations. The important fact is that classical scholars do often seem to have a higher estimate of the historical value of the New Testament than the professional theologians—and this is *not* because they are ignorant of the work of the latter. In a recent work Bruce comments, 'The NT writings were not, of course, designed as historians' source-material, and apart from Luke-Acts are not written in historiographical style; but historians will not be deterred on that account from using them as source-material; nor will they be intimidated by theologians

who assure them that their task is impossible and illegitimate!'[1]

Second, we may link with Bruce's classical outlook his stress on the importance of archaeology Classical archaeology has an important contribution to make to the understanding of the New Testament, especially in Acts whose detailed background can be substantiated to a remarkable extent from archaeological discoveries. Bruce's earliest book, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (first published in 1943) makes ample use of this method within the framework of a general treatment which takes full account of other types of critical study. In it he stated, 'I have written as a teacher of classics, with the purpose of showing that the grounds for accepting the New Testament as reliable compare very favourably with those on which the classical student accepts the authenticity and credibility of many ancient documents'.[2] His use of archaeological evidence forms an important element in the vindication of this conclusion.

Bruce's interest, however, has not been confined to classical archaeology. He gave the Tyndale Old Testament Lecture in 1947 on *The Hittites and the Old Testament.* Recently he was selected to write the chapter on Tell el-Amarna in the authoritative survey of *Archaeology and Old Testament Study* (1967) produced by the Society for Old Testament Study. He is editor of the *Palestine Exploration Quarterly.* Above all, he has taken a leading role in the discussion aroused by the Dead Sea Scrolls. This body of material, the most important discovery in Palestine in the last twenty-five years, has been the subject of much (sometimes uninformed) controversy. Some writers have argued that the Scrolls demonstrate that the claims of Christianity are neither original nor true, and that in consequence New Testament scholars have boycotted the Scrolls. Both claims can be summarily dismissed as unfounded.[3] On the contrary, New Testament scholars of all outlooks have warmly welcomed the evidence of the Scrolls for the valuable background information which they provide. Bruce has taken an important part in this discussion. Not only is he the author of one of the best surveys of the whole problem, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1956), he has also engaged in research into the way in which the Scrolls take up the Old Testament and reinterpret it in line with the Qumran sect's own conceptions of prophecy and its fulfilment in their era. A study of his monograph *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (1959) is highly fruitful for New Testament study.

Third, we must mention Bruce's interest in the Old Testament itself. The evangelical would affirm that the best single help to understanding the New Testament is the Old Testament. Although one must not forget the influence of Judaism and its exegetical traditions, nothing is likely to be more fruitful as a guide to New Testament thought than a study of the Old Testament. In several smaller publications Bruce has taken up this theme, and one of his latest books, *This is That* (1968), is a careful delineation of

1. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History,* (Nelson) 1969, 159 n. 1.
2. F. F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (I.V.F.) 1946[2], iii.
3. We may be sure that the recent attempt of J. Allegro to explain away Christianity in terms of the sacred mushroom will be no more successful than his earlier efforts to achieve the same end by reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

some Old Testament themes as they are handled in the New Testament.

The fruits of this approach may be seen in two of the main types of publication produced by Bruce. On the one hand, he has devoted considerable attention to the history of the biblical period. Three main works come into this category. The earliest was the trilogy, *The Dawn of Christianity* (1950), *The Growing Day* (1951) and *Light in the West* (1952), now united in one volume as *The Spreading Flame* (1953). The original impetus to this work was the aim of showing that the facts concerning *The Rise of Christianity* differed in very significant respects from the presentation of them in the book of that name by E. W. Barnes, a very liberal Bishop of Birmingham.[4] The result was a brilliant, eminently readable survey of the New Testament period, which Bruce was then persuaded to carry on into the sub-apostolic period and right through to the conversion of Britain. Next there came a history of *Israel and the Nations* (1963), which covered the period from the Exodus to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 with more particular reference to the second half of this period. Finally, there is a definitive *New Testament History* (1969) in which the New Testament Period itself is treated on a broad scale with concise summaries on a multitude of important matters. One could, however, wish for a more detailed treatment of several controversial issues in this volume. While Bruce is able to present a coherent and persuasive picture of New Testament history which is corroborated by a number of recent, similar investigations,[5] he has not entered sufficiently into debate with advocates of the approach which finds the New Testament evidence conflicting and tendentious.

On the other hand, we have a series of commentaries covering a goodly part of the New Testament. From Bruce's pen we have major treatments of Acts (1951 and 1954), Romans (1963), 1 and 2 Corinthians (1971), Colossians (1957) and Hebrews (1964). On a lesser scale he has dealt with Matthew (1970), Ephesians (1961), Thessalonians (1953), 1-3 John (1970) and Revelation (1969), as well as Judges (1953). He plans to write a major work on Galatians. The treatment of these various books naturally differs greatly according to the purpose for which the commentaries were written. Bruce is probably at his best in the volumes in the New London (=New International) Commentary. Here the format enables him to deal with the text in a manner that combines exegesis and exposition. He presents his material in a continuous exposition, which is intelligible to the Greekless reader, and reserves technical matters for a very full set of footnotes. The commentaries are thus valuable for more than one level of readership.

When Bruce's rather technical commentary on Acts was published, it was criticised by some readers for being too narrowly linguistic and historical and lacking theological content. The point was a fair one, but the explanation of the lack lay in the fact that Bruce was already at work

4. E. W. Barnes, *The Rise of Christianity* (Longmans) 1947; for a straight criticism of this work see F. G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Modern Scholarship* (Murray) 1948.

5. F. V. Filson, *A New Testament History* (S.C.M. Press) 1965; B. Reicke, *The New Testament Era* (Black) 1969; L. Goppelt, *Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Times* (Black) 1970.

on his commentary on the same book for the New London series, and in this later work proper attention is paid to theology. The fashion of the present day in New Testament scholarship (an eminently healthy one) is to highlight the theology of the various books. There can be no doubt that Bruce fully accepts this approach and his commentaries are written in the light of it.

Bruce has shown that a positively evangelical approach to the text of the New Testament makes sense of it. After all, the test of any kind of understanding of a text is whether it arises from the text and is demanded by the text or has been forced upon it at the expense of failure to do justice to the text. The text must make sense on its own terms. In Rudolf Bultmann's commentary on the Gospel of John, for example, the exegesis is conducted on the basis of the assumption that the Gospel is to be understood in terms of Existentialism: hence Bultmann continually expresses what John really means in Existentialist language. But this approach simply does not do justice to what John says; while it may be plausible for some parts of the Gospel, there are others which will not yield to this treatment, and so the whole method is rendered questionable.[6]

By contrast, Bruce's commentaries show that a different kind of theology is expressed in the New Testament. The important thing is that he finds it right and proper in his commentaries to express this theological message as being of permanent validity and of direct relevance for his readers. The characteristic mark of an evangelical understanding of the New Testament is that it sees it as a book which masters the exegete and submits him to the claims of its message. Bruce has shown that when the New Testament is treated honestly, with proper attention to context and background and all the other relevant factors, exegesis of it leads straight into exposition.

To be sure, the criticism is commonly raised against evangelicals that they come to terms with the text too easily. They assume without argument that the thought-forms of the past are still meaningful today; worse still, they imagine that the essential message of the New Testament does not need any correction or alteration in the light of succeeding centuries. So far as the former of these objections is concerned, it must be noted that Bruce himself is not afraid to raise questions as to how the New Testament is to be understood today and whether it may not require some 'translation' into modern terms. In a recent article on 'The Kerygma of Hebrews' he raises precisely this question.[7] But one shrewdly suspects that he would firmly claim, in answer to the second objection, that the New Testament is the authoritative revelation of God to us, and that there can be no question of evading its authority. Here the evangelical, who has shown that his interpretation of the New Testament is well-founded, has a right to claim

6. See R. Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John* (Herder) 1968, Vol. I.

7. For example, with reference to the heavenly intercession of Christ, Bruce writes: 'If we translate this emphasis into terms less pictorial than those which the writer to the Hebrews uses, we may say that the death of Christ, and the spirit in which he accepted death, constitute an abiding force in the eternal order, powerfully acting in defense of mankind' ('The Interpretation of Hebrews', *Interpretation* 23, January 1969, 3-19, quotation from 9).

that the message of the New Testament is to be heard and accepted on its own terms.

In these ways Bruce has demonstrated the scholarly character of the evangelical understanding of the New Testament. But we must now consider his work from a different point of view. The point which Bruce has made to the non-evangelical world also needs to be made to the evangelicals themselves. They must grasp the point that their position must be scholarly if it is to be of any value in the modern world, and that this insight may lead to the giving up of some cherished ideas which have come to be falsely associated with evangelicalism down the years.

Some evangelicals seem to be opposed to biblical scholarship *per se*, on grounds that it has nothing new to teach and, as practised by radicals, it has led to untold harm and even to the corruption of evangelicals. Far better to leave it alone, goes the argument, lest one be unconsciously contaminated by it. But even if some evangelicals have been well and truly scunnered by biblical scholarship—often with good cause—this can be no excuse for being unscholarly. The answer to bad scholarship based on faulty premises is not no scholarship but better scholarship. The Bible must be understood in a scholarly manner, and evangelicals must be prepared to play their part in this task.

Here Professor Bruce has played an important part. For example, one may still find evangelicals who are convinced that the Greek text behind the Authorised Version is the uncorrupted original text, and that the Authorised Version itself is the Word of God for our age, not to be replaced by any modern substitute. Such an attitude is fortunately almost extinct, and part of the reason for its demise lies in the work of Bruce. Like that early leader among the Brethren, S. P. Tregelles, he has played a leading part in commending the use of a reliable, modern text of the Scriptures. The 1947 edition of A. Souter's *Novum Testamentum Graece* contains a reference to Bruce's work in proof-reading on behalf of the veteran scholar. Two of Bruce's own books have examined the history of the text of the Bible. His early work, *The Books and Parchments* (1950), surveyed the story of the various ancient versions of the Bible, and his more recent book, *The English Bible* (1961, rev. 1970) has become the standard survey of the history of its subject up to the year of publication of the New English Bible. Nor is this all: Bruce has also produced *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (1965), which is intended as a help to study alongside the use of a more literal version. In these ways he has helped to commend to evangelicals the use of modern aids to Bible study, and has done much to make the taunt of obscurantism no longer applicable to them.

Again, Bruce has demonstrated that there must be a readiness to learn from non-evangelical scholars, even if this means giving up traditional positions. Many evangelicals find the idea that the Gospel writers used written sources abhorrent. (For some curious reason oral tradition seems to make less hairs bristle). Bruce, however, finds no difficulty in the possibility. He is increasingly cautious about attributing the Pastoral Epistles directly to the pen of Paul himself, since he is aware of the very real difficulties in the way of this theory. He would certainly disagree with the

view once expressed that anybody who cannot accept them as coming straight from Paul ought not to write a commentary on them until he has come to a better frame of mind. In Bruce's view the evangelical doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible is not tied down to particular traditional interpretations of the Bible. This may be hard for some to accept, and naturally there is considerable room for difference of opinion as to what are and are not the implications of the evangelical doctrine of the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible.

On a more personal level, Bruce has done much for the scholarly study of the Bible by evangelicals. No account of his work as a biblical scholar can afford to leave out the personal influence which he has had in encouraging other scholars and especially in helping younger men to make their way in scholarship. He has been ready to help older scholars such as G. H. Lang and E. K. Simpson with the technicalities of publication, and he has done much to commend the work of younger men also. One thinks too of his work as chairman of the New Testament study group of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research, where he has played a notable part over many years in encouraging others to undertake scholarly research.

F. F. Bruce may not go down in history as a creative, original thinker. His name will probably not be associated with any brilliant new thesis in biblical scholarship, in the way in which, for example, the name of C. H. Dodd has been associated with 'realised eschatology' or 'historical tradition in the Fourth Gospel'. His gifts are of a different order. They lie more in the ability to sift the work of others, to weed out what is ephemeral, and to present in solid and convincing form a picture of the real state of affairs. New Testament history and theology alike are thus placed on a firm basis; the reader knows that he will learn much from the presentation, and that he will not be exposed to daring and unlikely hypotheses. It should be unnecessary to plead that this is the proper task of the scholar, and that, while one is grateful for the stimulus of new hypotheses, it is of supreme value to be presented with sound learning and sober conclusions.

The quality of F. F. Bruce as a biblical scholar is universally recognised. Few British scholars receive the honour of a *Festschrift*, a gift (as the name implies) more German than English; and there is no doubt that Bruce well deserves his, as he has deserved his earlier honours. May he continue to put the world of scholarship in his debt for many years to come!