J. B. Lightfoot (died 1889), Commentator and Theologian

Professor Bruce continues our series on topics in Historical Theology

Joseph Barber Lightfoot was born in Liverpool in 1828. His family moved to Birmingham, where (from 1844) he was educated at King Edward School, under the headmastership of James Prince Lee, later first Bishop of Manchester. At school, he formed a lifelong friendship with E. W. Benson (destined to become Archbishop of Canterbury).

In 1847 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where one of his classical tutors was Brooke Foss Westcott, his senior by only three years (and himself a former pupil of King Edward School, Birmingham). He took a double First (in classics and mathematics) and, in 1852, was elected a Fellow of Trinity, becoming a tutor in the college five years later. He was ordained deacon in 1854 and priest in 1858 – on both occasions at the hands of Bishop Prince Lee. In 1861 he became Hulsean Professor of Divinity at Cambridge and, in 1875, Lady Margaret's Professor. (He had been appointed to a canonry at St Paul's in 1871.) In 1879 he was preferred to the see of Durham, where he remained until his death in 1889.

Major tasks

In his earlier years as a college teacher he taught classics as well as Greek New Testament: at one time he contemplated producing a critical edition of Euripides. To those years too, belongs the short-lived *Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology* (1854-59), of which he was joint-editor. To his mastery of classical literature he added a wide and exact acquaintance with the Greek and Latin fathers. Five years after taking his degree he began to study the letters of Ignatius – an exercise which was to engage his attention for the next 30 years.

From 1871 to 1881 Lightfoot was also an active member of the New Testament Company of Revisers. The thought which he devoted to this work is illustrated by his essay, *On a Fresh Revision of the English New Testament* (1871, 31891).

In 1859 or 1860, evidently in response to a suggestion by Macmillan the publisher, Lightfoot agreed with Westcott and another Trinity man, F. J. A. Hort (Lightfoot's exact contemporary), to collaborate in producing a commentary on the Greek text of the New Testament, critically edited. Lightfoot was to be responsible for the Pauline Epistles. None of the three completed his assignment, but Lightfoot came nearer to completion than either of the other two (who, from 1853 to 1881, were engaged on their own critical edition of the New Testament text). Lightfoot might have come nearer to completion had he not given so much time to a task which (in the light of contemporary study of early Christianity) was even more urgent – a historical and critical examination of the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (more particularly Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp).

The importance of this task can be readily appreciated. The influential school of Ferdinand Christian Baur (died 1860) and his Tubingen associates and pupils had advocated a chronological reconstruction of early Christian literature, which placed the Gospels and Acts so late as to be practically valueless as historical sources. Only four of the Pauline Epistles (I and II Corinthians, Galatians and Romans) and the the Apocalypse could be dated in the apostolic age. The remaining New testament books reflected a time when the tensions of the apostolic age had been resolved, and this (according to Baur) could not well be earlier than the middle of the second century. Now Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp all flourished before the middle of the second century, and to all of them are ascribed letters still extant which presuppose some at least of the New Testament writings. Ignatius is specially important: he met his death in the principipate of Trajan (AD 98-117), and the letters which have come down under his name reflect a stage of church life and administration in advance of that reflected in the New Testament. The genuineness of Ignatian letters was bound to be denied by Baur and his school; if their genuineness could be established it would no longer be possible to date most of the New Testament in the second half of the second century. The establishment of the genuineness of seven of them was Lightfoot's achievement. The tensions of the apostolic age were real enough: their resolution, however, belonged not to the second century but to the first. But, before more is said about Lightfoot's study of Ignatius, his commentaries on the Pauline Epistles call for our attention.

The Pauline Epistles

One of the most serious of the tensions of the apostolic age was that between Paul and the judaizers who tried to dilute his law-free gospel with an infusion of legalism. This tension is documented pre-eminently in the letter to the Galatians. It was appropriate, then, that the first instalment of Lightfoot's New Testament assignment should be his commentary on Galatians (1865); it was, indeed, the first instalment of the whole triple project launched by Westcott, Hort and himself. It remains one of the great commentaries on Galatians: I should not quarrel with anyone who maintains that it is still the greatest.

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In a number of respects, of course, a work published in 1865 is inevitably dated. For example, W. M. Ramsay's researches into the historical geography of Asia Minor did not begin until 15 years later, and one aspect of the study of Galatians has never been the same since then. But the foundation of Lightfoot's work was sound, and the structure has stood the test of time. When the commentary was published, Hort regretted that it was inadequate on the theological side. In fact, Lightfoot was wise not to venture into the field of speculative theology in which Hort was interested: his strength lay on the historical side, and the need of the hour was for the reinforcement of the historical foundation of the Christian faith. This was the need which Lightfoot so signally met.

He rarely refers to Baur, and certainly did not make it his business to offer a direct rebuttal of the arguments of the Tubingen school. Instead, he went back, as Baur and his colleagues did, to the sources, and found that his study of them led to conclusions quite

different from those of Tubingen. Some of the issues raised by Baur and others are dealt with in dissertations included in the Galatians volume: 'The Brethren of the Lord', and, especially, 'St Paul and the Three' (i.e. the three 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church).

In discussing 'St Paul and the Three', Lightfoot had no difficulty in showing that there was no sharp opposition in point of principle between Paul and Peter. Paul does not suggest that there was any essential difference between his gospel and Peter's, and the whole point of his charge of 'dissimulation' against Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:13) lay in the fact that Peter was in basic agreement with his own position as regards table-fellowship with Gentiles. As for the apostolic decree of Acts 15:28f., Lightfoot might have been better advised not to treat it as the product of the same conference as that reported by Paul in Gal. 2:10. However that may be, the question of Paul's relation to the decree would require fuller treatment today than it receives in Lightfoot's dissertation. In particular, he does not deal adequately with Paul's silence about the decree in his response about food sacrificed to idols in I Cor. 8:1-11:1, and with the fact that, whereas the decree forbids the eating of such food, Paul permits it except where it would harm the conscience either of the eater or others. He might have tackled these problems in greater depth if he had been able to write a commentary on I Corinthians.

Lightfoot, however, warns against investing the church of apostolic days with an 'ideal excellence'. 'In its inward dissensions no less than in its outward sufferings' the primitive church proved the truth of the Lord's warning that he came 'not to send peace on earth, but a sword'.

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The second in the series of Pauline commentaries was *Philippians* (1868); the third was *Colossians and Philemon (1875). Philippians* is probably best known for the dissertation on 'The Christian Ministry' appended to it (a dissertation which remains a classic on the subject). In *Colossians and Philemon* careful attention is paid to the nature of the 'Colossian heresy'. that there was a Colossian heresy Lightfoot had no doubt: it was, he concluded, a form of 'Essene Ebionitism'. He enhanced the value of this commentary with a dissertation on the Essenes, running to more than 80 pages. When one considers the nonsense that was being written about the Essenes in Lightfoot's day (not to mention the nonsense that is till being written about them 100 years later), Lightfoot's dissertation is outstanding as a scholarly and authoritative account of the sect, based on the ancient sources which were extant at the time. Whether the Qumran community, whose writings have come to light since 1947, belonged to the Essenes or not, the Qumran discoveries have provided the study of the Essenes with a new context. In the light of this new context, the up-to-date quality of Lightfoot's treatment is the more impressive.

'The recluse ascetic brotherhood, which was gathered about the shores of the Dead Sea, does not once appear above the Evangelists' horizon'. Attempts had been made, Lightfoot points out, to link John the Baptist and James, the Lord's brother, with the Essenes. Similar attempts have been made in our own day. His refutation of the arguments for such links retains its validity against more recent arguments to the same effect. little can be added, and nothing of importance, to what Lightfoot wrote in 1875.

The Apostolic Fathers

Before the publication of *Colossians and Philemon*, Lightfoot had produced the first instalment of his edition of the Apostolic Fathers – a volume on Clement of Rome (1869). (A supplementary volume, dealing with new evidence for the text which had become accessible, appeared in 1877; a revision of the whole was published in 1890.) His work on Ignatius and Polycarp appeared in 1885 in two volumes (actually three, for Volume II was published in two separate sections); a revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1889. Lightfoot had also made preparations for an edition of Barnabas and Hermas, but he did not live to produce this.

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His edition of Ignatius is his greatest and most important work. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch on the Orontes, is said by Eusebius to have been sent to Rome to be exposed to wild beasts in the arena and to have written seven letters while he was passing through the province of Asia – sic to various churches and one to Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna. Eusebius gives quotations from two of these letters.

Letters attributed to Ignatius survived in manuscript tradition throughout the Middle Ages; they were first printed (in a Latin translation) in 1498. By then they numbered more than seven: 13 in all were in circulation. Some of these were clearly spurious, and even those which corresponded to the seven mentioned by Eusebius contained interpolations manifestly later than the time of Ignatius. But three seventeenth century scholars – James Ussher in 1644, Isaac Voss in 1646, and John Pearson in 1674 – did much to establish the uninterpolated text of the genuine letters.

The uninterpolated Ignatius text reflects a situation a generation or two later than the bulk of the New testament. If, then, the letters of Ignatius were written earlier than AD 117, the bulk of the New Testament must be dated in the first century. To establish the genuineness of the uninterpolated letters beyond reasonable doubt was, therefore, a service of the first magnitude to the study of the New Testament. This was the service which Lightfoot accomplished. The Tubingen school might deny the authenticity of any of the letters attributed to Ignatius, but what was the evidence, and what were the conclusions to which it pointed? These were the questions to which Lightfoot addressed himself, and so thoroughly did he vindicate the genuineness of the seven uninterpolated letters that his arguments have never been refuted, and few have dissented from his conclusions. His work represents a triumph for the historical-critical method. Bishop Stephen Neill knew what he was about when he said that, if he had his way, 'at least 500 pages of Lightfoot's *Apostolic Fathers* would be required reading for every theological student in his first year'. That presupposes, of course, that every theological student in his first year is sufficiently competent in Greek to

follow Lightfoot's argument. If theology is 'grammar applied to the text', Lightfoot was a consummate theologian. But perhaps his generation was that in which Greek scholarship in England reached a level unmatched in later generations. Lightfoot himself feared that this might be so: 'I should be glad to think my apprehensions groundless, but there is at least some reason to forbode that Greek scholarship has reached its height in England, and that henceforth it may be expected to decline'.

While the first edition of *Ignatius and Polycarp* appeared in 1885, an important part of its argument had been published in a more popular form a decade earlier. In 1874 there appeared a work entitled *Supernatural Religion*, originally anonymous, but later revealed to be by Walter R. Cassels. This work was designed to recommend a form of Christianity devoid of any supernatural element, and among its arguments it appealed to the late dating of the Gospels approved by the Tubingen school. Lightfoot might have paid too little attention to it had the author not gratuitously impugned the integrity of B. F. Westcott in a manner which betrayed his own linguistic incompetence. closer examination showed Lightfoot that the author's case was vitiated by further instances of incompetence, which he exposed in a series of articles in the *Contemporary Review* (1874-77). These articles were collected in book form as *Essays on the Work Entitled 'Supernatural Religion'* (London, 1889). This volume, an examination of the early witnesses to the first-century origin of the Gospels, remains a valuable contribution to the study of early Christian literature. The two chapters of Pappias. for example, sum up the significance of that writer as ably as has ever been done.

Other writings

Since Lightfoot was unable to complete commentaries on all the Pauline Epistles, the trustees of his estate published a volume entitled *Notes on the Epistles of St Paul* (London, 1895), reproducing in the main notes of lectures which he had delivered in his Cambridge days on I and II Thessalonians, I Corinthians 1-7, Romans 1-7, and Ephesians 1:1-14. These notes contain a wealth of exegetical treasure, though they cannot be regarded as a substitute for the full commentaries which their author did not live to write.

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The trustees had already published a volume of *Biblical Essays* (London, 1893), bringing together articles which had been contributed by Lightfoot to various periodicals together with previously unpublished lectures on a number of New Testament subjects, including in particular 'the authenticity and genuineness of St John's Gospel' (three essays running to nearly 200 pages).

Two further articles must be mentioned: one of 36 columns on 'Acts of the Apostles' in the second edition of William Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible* (1893), which must have been written in the late 1870s, and one of over 80 columns on 'Eusebius of Caearea' in William Smith and Henry Wace's *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, vol. II (1880), which was described in 1890 as 'the best and most exhaustive treatment of the life and writings of Eusebius that has been written'.

Lightfoot's theology was the theology of the historic creeds and the Thirty-nine Articles. His vindication of the firm historical foundation of the Christian faith was the theological contribution which his generation required (our own generation requires it no less). If we may regret that he left so much projected work unfinished, the wonder is that he achieved so much as he did. He died at the age of 61, whereas many a man's best work is produced in his sixties; moreover, a great part of his last decade was necessarily devoted to the exacting demands of his bishopric. Even so, he found time to establish at Auckland Castle a kind of rudimentary theological college, comprising those 'Sons of the House' on whom Lightfoot's personal faith and life left an indelible impression.

In this centenary year of his death we may assess his greatness by considering how few scholars of his generation there are whose works still take front rank among the required reading on the subjects which they cover, as Lightfoot's works do.

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