

Bishop Westcott and the Classical Tradition

F.F. Bruce

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Westcott was born near Birmingham and educated in King Edward VI School in that city (1837-1844), under the headmastership of James Prince Lee. (Prince Lee later became Bishop of Manchester, where he was a centre of controversy. Less controversially, we still have Bishop Lee Prizes in Greek Testament in the University of Manchester, established in his memory.) At school Westcott gave early proof of his ability. In due course he became head of the school, and in that capacity had once to compose and read a Latin address of welcome to the Prince Consort. The address contained the customary request for a holiday, of which Albert took no notice. Westcott retired to his room, quickly re-wrote the address in English and presented it to him again—this time with the desired effect.

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The headmaster of Harrow at the time of Westcott's appointment was Charles John Vaughan, a notable educationist who was ahead of his time in realising the need for the vocational training of ordinands and doing what he could personally to supply the need. Until recently some very old clergymen were to be found in England who had received such training from Vaughan in his private residence, members of the fellowship of 'Vaughan's doves' who, over the years, came to number between four and five hundred. In his last years, when he was Dean of Llandaff, Vaughan was first President of University College, Cardiff. Like his distinguished assistant, Vaughan himself was the author of helpful commentaries on the Greek New Testament (which did not, however, attain to the Westcott league).

Vaughan appointed Westcott in the first instance to help him in marking the Latin and Greek composition exercises of the sixth form. As time went on he undertook other duties: he was, for example, housemaster first of a small house and then of a larger one. "For the work of an ordinary form-master he was not well-fitted," says his biographer in the *DNB* (V.H. Stanton). "He did not understand the ordinary boy, and he had some difficulty in maintaining discipline. But on individual boys, of minds and characters more or less responsive to his, he made a deep impression. Happily both in his small house and his large house there were an unusual

number of boys of promise. Meanwhile the school—masters and boys alike—increasingly, as time went on, looked up to him as a man of great and varied learning.”

During his Harrow years he perfected those gifts which speedily won him a place in the front rank of New Testament scholarship. To this period belong his *History of the New Testament Canon* (1855), *Introduction to the Study of the Gospels* (1860), *The Bible in the Church* (1864) and *History of the English Bible* (1868). It was in this period, too, that he began his close collaboration with his friends of Cambridge days, Fenton John Anthony Hort and Joseph Barber Lightfoot. (All three in due course occupied Divinity Chairs in Cambridge.) In 1853 Westcott and Hort began working on the critical edition of the text of the Greek New Testament which was completed and published in 1881. In 1860 the three scholars decided to partition the whole New Testament among themselves so as to produce a series of commentaries covering every book. They were encouraged in this by Macmillan the publisher, who appears indeed to have taken the initiative. The enterprise was never completed, though it was worthily begun. Even for such dedicated and indefatigable workers as Westcott, Lightfoot and Hort, time and energy are limited, and writing commentaries on the New Testament was not the only work they had to do in the following years.

Lightfoot became Bishop of Durham in 1879 and was followed in that see by Westcott. Lightfoot died at the age of 61; he might have written much more had he lived for

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Hort did not write much. The quality of his work can be seen from several volumes of lectures, most of which were published posthumously: *Two Dissertations* (1876), *The Way, the Truth and the Life* (1894), *Judaistic Christianity* (1894), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1895), *The Christian Ecclesia* (1897) and *Clementine Recognitions* (1901). As regards contributing to the commentary project, he made a beginning with James, 1 Peter and Revelation, and the fragments which he left were published after his death: 1 Peter 1:1-2:7 (1898), Revelation 1-3 (1908) and James 1:1-4:7 (1909). Westcott, who wrote a preface for the Peter volume, included among Hort's qualities as an interpreter his keen historical insight and his dominant interest in theology. Hort's principal contribution to New Testament study lay in the textual realm: in his work for the Revised Version (1881) and the Westcott-Hort Greek Testament, in which he played the major part.

Westcott's teaching career at Harrow came to an end in 1869, when he was appointed Canon Residentiary of Peterborough. But a year later the Regius Chair of divinity at Cambridge became vacant, and Westcott was elected to fill it. Lightfoot, who had held the Hulsean Chair in that university since 1861, might have become Regius Professor had he consented, but he preferred to make way for Westcott, whose return to Cambridge he eagerly welcomed. As for Westcott, he became Canon of Westminster in 1883 and Bishop of Durham in 1890, in succession to Lightfoot. He died in 1901, (and was succeeded in the see by another Cambridge theologian, Handley Moule). As Bishop of Durham he was able to show qualities whose existence might not have been suspected: he established friendly relations with the coal-miners of his diocese. In 1892 he mediated acceptably in a coal strike, and in 1894 he addressed the Northumberland miners' annual gala at Blyth. The former occasion inspired a local versifier to compose some lines, beginning with the couplet:

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Westcott's contributions to the Macmillan series were his commentaries on the Epistles of John (1883) and Hebrews (1889); a commentary on Ephesians, which was left unfinished at his death, was edited by J.M. Schulhof and published in 1906.

If one were to single out Westcott's chief virtues as an interpreter of Scripture, they would be linguistic precision and spiritual insight—two virtues not always found together. His linguistic precision no doubt owed much to the thorough grammatical training he had received from James Prince Lee during his school days in Birmingham. His spiritual insight was part of his own religious life and temperament. It was fostered by the study not only of Christian literature but also of Greek philosophy. "Those hours which were spent over Plato and Aristotle," he wrote to Lightfoot (when thanking him for a wedding present), "have wrought that in me which I pray may never be done away." Such insight served him well in interpreting a work of the depth of the Gospel of John.

Those who were not on the same wavelength in this regard found that his thought had a mystical quality which was not easy to grasp. On one occasion when London was troubled by an exceptionally dense fog, Canon H.P. Liddon, of St. Paul's, remarked (a little waspishly), "It

is commonly attributed to Dr. Westcott having opened his study window in Westminster". Canon Liddon entertained theological suspicions of the Cambridge trio—not so much personally of Westcott but particularly of Hort. But there is much truth in Dr. Henry Chadwick's comment on Westcott: "All who looked to him for snap answers delivered with certainty based on supernaturally guaranteed authority found that, like Izion, they were embracing a cloud." To my own way of thought, Lightfoot is the most congenial member of the three. But even Lightfoot had his limitations, whereas the three together shared almost all the qualities which make for biblical theology of the highest rank.

Westcott was unreservedly committed to the historic Christian faith. His doctrine of Scripture was not systematically developed beyond the statement of Article VI, but to him Scripture was the Word of God, and if he did not formulate his approach to it in terms of verbal inspiration, he handled it as if it were indeed verbally inspired, down to the minutest details. In the introduction to his commentary on the Epistles of John, he says, "It has been my main desire to call attention to the minutest points of language, construction, order, as serving to illustrate the meaning of St. John. I do not venture to pronounce that any variation is trivial or unimportant. The exact words are for us the decisive expression of the Apostle's thought. I have therefore, if I may borrow words which have been applied in a somewhat different sense, begun by interpreting the Epistles as I should 'interpret any other book', neglecting nothing which might contribute to a right apprehension of its full meaning.... Many writings, it is true, will not bear the consistent application of such a method of interpretation; but each day's study brings home to me more forcibly the conviction that in no other way can we hope to gain the living truth of apostolic teaching."

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The whole introduction, indeed, is an eloquent statement of Westcott's doctrine and practice.

But where are the tools to be found for biblical study of this order? Westcott, like Hort and Lightfoot, found the tools in a thorough classical education. None of the three had any formal theological training: Westcott and Lightfoot took double honours in classics and mathematics and Hort in classics and moral and natural sciences. Westcott taught classics at Harrow, Lightfoot lectured in classics as a young fellow of Trinity, and Hort seems to have taught and examined in anything but divinity during his early years as a Fellow of the same college. But their classical training and teaching gave them the best possible foundation for their life-work.

All three did their work so well that their writings are still indispensable reading for any student specialising in these fields. They were children of their age, indeed, but by their work they helped to make their age what it was and set the impress of their minds upon it.

Westcott's knowledge of the whole Greek Bible was related to his knowledge of the whole range of Greek literature from the beginning of the classical period to the end of the patristic period. True, he and his colleagues did most of their work before the great papyrus discoveries which increased our knowledge of the Greek vernacular of the New Testament age, but commentators on John, Paul and the author of Hebrews will find more help in

Plutarch and Epictetus than from the family correspondence and census lists of Hellenistic Egypt. It is much rarer for commentators today to come to the study of the Greek New Testament with such a rich equipment—an equipment which was accompanied by a rare feeling for the sense of the Greek. Westcott's minute attention to the finer points of the language—prepositions, particles, tenses and so forth—may have been overdone, but if so, it was a fault in the right direction. It was not the pedantry of a mere lexicographer, but the devotion of one to whose sensitive mind classical Greek was still a living language.

The kind of detailed word study with which we have been familiarised by Kittel's *Theological Dictionary* was anticipated by Westcott. His notes on the use of the terms *hilasmos* ('propitiation') and *monogenēs* ('only-begotten') in his commentary on the Johannine letters are models for their kind. Another note in the same commentary ('The idea of Christ's blood in the New Testament') has been even more influential: Westcott acknowledges his indebtedness to the Aberdeen scholar William Milligan, but it is Westcott's note that has been responsible for the wide diffusion among English-speaking theologians of the view that sacrificial blood "includes the thought of the life preserved and active beyond death". This is, to be sure, a very doubtful view, but then it is not dependent on classical scholarship.

When Westcott was faced by a non-classical construction, he was apt to seek a special theological reason for it. He did this, for example, for the preposition *pros* (used in the phrase 'with God' in John 1:1,2). "The personal being of the Word," he comments, "was realised in active intercourse with and in perfect communion with God." This is certainly true, but it is not involved with John's choice of *pros* instead of some commoner preposition meaning 'with'. We can value Westcott's insights in theological exegesis without basing them so confidently as he did on the minutiae of linguistic usage.

To his linguistic sensitivity Westcott added the essential quality of sympathy with the writers whose works he interpreted. It is no accident that his greatest commentaries were written on the works of two authors with whose minds his own was closely attuned—John and the writer to the Hebrews. Not only was his mind attuned to theirs; he was convinced of the permanent validity and relevance of what they had to say. If he set out to interpret their writings as he would "interpret any other book", his experience in interpreting them thus led him to the assurance that they have a quality unshared by any other book.

What I learn from the exegetical work of Westcott and his great contemporaries, and of the leading interpreters of the next two generations, is something which is confirmed in my own experience, although I trail a long way behind them. That is, that for the exact study of the New Testament nothing can provide a sounder academic foundation than the old-fashioned classical curriculum. Indeed, I have the authority of Sir Godfrey Driver, no less, for saying the same thing about the study of the *Old* Testament. He used to say that Semitic scholars who lacked this foundation revealed the lack of it in their undisciplined procedures. When one recalls Sir Godfrey's own more adventurous excursions in Semitic philology, it can only be supposed that they would have been more adventurous still but for his classical training!

When I am asked the best way to master the Greek language, Rule 1 is "Start young". And Rule 2 is "Learn *Greek*"—by which I mean more Greek than the Greek New Testament, or even the Greek Bible. No one who knows no Greek outside of the New Testament can understand the Greek of the New Testament itself. To understand the Greek of the New Testament one needs an adequate literary context in which to view it properly. With an adequate literary context it is possible to know what a Greek sentence or paragraph can mean and cannot mean; it is possible to get a feel for the language (*Sprachgefühl*, as the Germans say), which is a different matter altogether from identifying the individual words in a lexicon or concordance.

But the value of a classical education is not confined to its help in understanding the New Testament. The Head Master of Eton has recently said that "a good knowledge of Latin enriches a man's knowledge of much of English literature at least as much as colour improves the picture on the television screen, while a similar knowledge of Greek enhances our understanding of philosophy and politics to a like degree" (The Teaching of Classics', *Daily Telegraph*, April 19th, 1978). Readers of *Spectrum* will be well advised to have a look at the new course for people wishing to start Greek in the sixth form or at university, published in May of this year by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers. There is ample and welcome evidence of an increasing interest in the history, archaeology and culture of classical antiquity; for some at least this interest could be still be satisfied by an introduction to the languages of classical antiquity.

PORTRAIT GALLERY

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CORRECTION

The portrait Gallery biography of St. Augustine in Spectrum 10.3 was written by Colin Brown, not Paul Hunt as stated. Colin Brown is Head of Education Section, Avery Hill College of Education.