

F.F. Bruce and the Development of Evangelical Biblical Scholarship

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A few weeks ago, a Presbyterian minister and his wife, on holiday from the United States, came into my office. They were looking for places where F.F. Bruce used to teach. At the same time I had an email in my in-box, asking a question about Bruce's views. Colleagues at Sheffield also tell of visits relating to Bruce, more than forty years after he left the department that he had established.

Bruce had hardly any theological training and no Ph.D. Yet he not only held chairs at Sheffield and then Manchester but went on to have the very rare distinction of being president of both the Society for Old Testament Study (a British society) and the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas. He was made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1973 and was awarded the Academy's Burkitt Medal in 1979. In 1970 he was presented with a Festschrift with a *tabula gratulatoria* that ran from J.I. Packer and Carl F. Henry to Oscar Cullmann and Hans Dieter Betz. A further Festschrift was produced ten years later. How did he attain such eminence without any of the normal qualifications? How did he become a figure who was admired both by the flag-bearers of conservative theology and by the doyens of European biblical scholarship?

The mystery deepens further: 'F.F. Bruce may not go down in history as a creative, original thinker.'¹ This was written by a friend of Bruce, at a time when Bruce was not only alive but still in post at Manchester. The statement is in a journal issue devoted to 'the contribution of Frederick Fyvie Bruce'. If Bruce was uncreative and unoriginal, how did he influence and inspire a generation of people in settings as diverse as Brethren churches in the United Kingdom and Presbyterian colleges in the United States? More pointedly, what kind of man has friends who think that he will not mind being described as uncreative and unoriginal? In any case, do the charges stick?

Turning to our wider topic, when Bruce was still a classics lecturer at the University of Leeds he was called in by a group of evangelicals connected with the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (IVF) in the United Kingdom (now called the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship). They wanted to do something about the desperate situation of evangelical biblical scholarship in the UK. It was 1941 and there had been virtually no evangelical biblical scholar of note in England since Handley Moule at the beginning of the century. Evangelicals who studied theology at university generally ended up either changing their theological outlook entirely or retreating into a cocoon spun from the works of nineteenth-century writers such as J.B. Lightfoot and B.F.

* I would like to express my appreciation to all the many people who were happy to talk with me about Bruce. In particular, I want to thank Alan Millard for not only talking but also providing invaluable documentation and for reading the draft article. He, of course, bears no responsibility for any errors in it.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, 'FF. Bruce as a biblical scholar', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 5-12 (here at 12).

Westcott.² It was symptomatic of the situation that Bruce was called in as the New Testament ‘expert’ despite never having trained in the field.

By 1980 many British universities had at least one evangelical biblical scholar on their staff. Moreover, Britain had become a place to which evangelicals from around the world came for Ph.D. study. When I first arrived at Manchester I had the biblical studies Ph.D. theses in my office. I could chart the beginnings of the incoming tide as the first wave of such students came, to study with Bruce, from the 1960s onwards.

Bruce’s influence went beyond impressing academics and attracting Ph.D. students. His books became a mainstay of evangelical students, ministers and lay workers. He also became a frequent speaker at student meetings of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, which played a central role in the revival of the evangelical position in UK churches in the second half of the twentieth century.³ As a result of Bruce’s speaking and writing, Oliver Barclay could write, in 1971, that the ‘I.V.F. and its associate movements would not be what they are apart from F.F.B. And we trust that our experience of fellowship in days gone by is merely a token of many years of fruitful co-operation during years to come.’⁴

But thereby hangs a tale, which leads to a crucial issue for our chapter. By 1997 Oliver Barclay had virtually written Bruce out of his account of the post-war renewal of evangelicalism, despite Barclay’s story centring on the IVF, which he had related so firmly to Bruce in 1971. The reason for Barclay’s change is seen in one of his very few references to Bruce in *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935–1995*:

Theological study has been highly rationalistic, and this has produced a tradition of believing only what can be rationally justified. Evangelicals working in this milieu have followed the tradition and argued for a conservative position on exclusively rational grounds ...

... to show that our Lord and the apostles taught something is no longer regarded as sufficient. It is hard to set out an unambiguously revealed theology and to speak of a word from God. As John Wenham expressed it, the result is that people end up as conservative liberals rather than slightly liberal conservatives. They have accepted the liberal methodology, and its consequences emerge only later in their ministry. Thus even F.F. Bruce, who had done so much to revive evangelical scholarship, eventually came to hold that the apostle Paul was in error on at least one major point.⁵

We shall discuss Barclay’s specific assertion below (p. 115). More generally, the word ‘evangelical’ is a contested term. Should Bruce be called evangelical or does his consistent use of historical methods mean that he should be viewed as a rather

² Oliver R. Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935-1995; a personal sketch* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 18-19.

³ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 259.

⁴ Oliver R. Barclay, ‘F.F. Bruce and the Inter-Varsity Fellowship’, *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 20.

⁵ Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, 129. In an endnote (153 n. 16) Barclay cites F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the free spirit* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1977) (American title and publisher: *Paul: Apostle of the heart set free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

conservative liberal? Did his basic approach change over time?

However, the crucial issue for us is not the locating of Bruce in relation to any party boundaries. The discomfort of some evangelicals with Bruce's work stems from the fact that he sought to bring about changes in evangelicalism itself. Bruce made such a far-reaching contribution to the development of evangelical biblical scholarship because he led the field in doing two things. His work persuaded academics of all theological colours that worthwhile academic work could be done by a scholar holding evangelical views. Bruce also persuaded evangelicals to use a much wider range of academic methods for study of the Bible, and to be open to results that might differ from views traditionally held by evangelicals.

Each of these tasks was Herculean, given both the academic hostility to evangelicalism at the start of Bruce's career and the intellectual insularity of much of evangelicalism at that period. However, Bruce's achievements in both spheres came about very simply, as we shall see. Simply, but not easily. The work that lay behind Bruce's success was genuinely heroic.

One of the Brethren

F.F. Bruce was a very committed, orthodox, Protestant Christian. His father, Peter Fyvie Bruce (Fyvie was his mother's maiden name) was an itinerant evangelist in the north-east of Scotland. F.F. Bruce's mother was a nursemaid from the Highlands. Frederick Fyvie Bruce was born in 1910. Life at their home, in Elgin, was shaped by the events, issues and financial constraints that were inherent in the life of the family of a man engaged in travelling to preach the gospel and in meeting (often at the Bruce home) others who did the same.⁶ Raised in a context of constant encounter with church and church work, Fred Bruce seems to have been steadily involved in both from an early age. He was baptized and admitted to formal church membership in 1928.⁷

The word 'church' needs some unpacking in this case. F.F. Bruce belonged, throughout his life, to what he described as 'the people called Brethren'⁸ (following a phrase of John Wesley). In the early nineteenth century, in Dublin, a group of laypeople and clergy (among whom a prominent member was J.N. Darby) sought to establish interdenominational meetings. An unintended outcome of this was that some people broke away from their denominations. The resulting form of association spread to England, with the first English congregation being formed at Plymouth in 1831 (hence the common description 'Plymouth Brethren').⁹ In 1848 Darby tried to insist that all Brethren congregations agree to exclude anyone in fellowship with a certain B.W. Newton, whose views Darby saw as heretical.¹⁰ Some followed Darby's lead, producing congregations generally known as Exclusive Brethren. Others insisted on maintaining autonomy of judgement, producing the groups usually called Open Brethren, to which F.F. Bruce always belonged. The congregation's autonomy of judgement—against even

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *In retrospect: remembrance of things past* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1980), 12–15, 19 n. 1.

⁷ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 17.

⁸ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 286.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, 'Who are the Brethren?', revised version in *In retrospect*, Appendix 1, 314.

¹⁰ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 10 n. 9, following H.H. Rowdon, *The origins of the Brethren, 1825–1850* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1967), 258–66.

respected preachers and leaders of the Open Brethren movement, so how much more against parsons, prelates and theologians!—was something that Bruce stressed in his background. He saw the tendency as further reinforced by the fiercely independent spirit of north-east Scotland.¹¹ This autonomy of judgement is profoundly important in understanding both Bruce's willingness to promote academic conclusions at variance with existing scholars and his willingness to propound methods and conclusions at variance with general evangelical practice and ideas.

The surprising thing about the Open Brethren is that their apparent recipe for theological and ecclesiastical anarchy has not led to chaos in either sphere. In fact, strong, informal traditions have grown up in both areas. Theology has been of a fairly uniformly conservative evangelical nature. Two main ecclesiological models have developed. In the classic one, the congregation has no full-time minister, is governed by a group of elders and has services characterized by spontaneous leading of worship (usually by men). The second model uses one or more paid ministers, and this is often associated with more conventionally planned services. I myself have belonged to both kinds of church. Bruce maintained not only membership but active involvement in preaching and other church duties, right on into retirement.

He inherited his church's evangelical theology. He maintained a commitment to such orthodox, Protestant beliefs throughout his career, however much some of his academic conclusions may occasionally have disturbed other evangelicals. He happily kept on assenting to the IVF 'doctrinal basis',¹² although he did express a preference for the pre-war formulation of that,¹³ because it gave a careful and moderate explanation of the term 'infallibility (see below, p. 110). His published work was full of arguments for a high view of the historical accuracy of the biblical text and its compatibility with evangelical ideas about Christ, salvation and other major issues.

The most striking expression of Bruce's Christian commitment was his willingness to put astonishing amounts of time into supporting the Christian life of individuals by answering their questions. One form that this took was in replying to the many letters sent to him. (As Alan Millard recalls, one guest at the Bruces' home realized that there was something unusual about F.F. Bruce only when she saw the great quantity of mail that arrived at the breakfast table every day.)¹⁴ G.C.D. Howley and others noticed the speed with which Bruce replied to letters.¹⁵ From July 1952 to April 1975 Bruce also wrote a monthly 'Answers to questions' page in a Brethren magazine called *The Harvester*. Many of these were collected in a book with the same title as the column. The range is such as to induce vertigo: 'Does Rom. 6:3, 4 refer to baptism in water?'; 'Does Rom. 9:13 mean literally that God hated Esau?'; 'Do you identify the Messianic reign with the millennium of Revelation 20?'; 'Should a church always pay the expenses of a visiting speaker, even when he is known to be quite well off?'; 'Is it against Scriptural principles to book speakers one or two years ahead?'; 'Do not the healings which take

¹¹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 1–11.

¹² Bruce, *In retrospect*, 310.

¹³ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 45.

¹⁴ A.R. Millard, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce 1910-1990', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 36:1 (1991), 1-6 (here at 6).

¹⁵ G.C.D. Howley, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce: an appreciation', in *Apostolic history and the gospel: biblical and historical essays presented to F.F. Bruce on his 60th birthday*, eds W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P Martin (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1972), 19.

place at Lourdes confirm the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary?’¹⁶ His answer to the last question is characteristically patient, knowledgeable and charitable. He explains how the account of the appearance to Bernadette Soubirous makes a specific link to the doctrine. He cites Roman Catholic friends who have told him about the range of experiences of visitors to Lourdes. He cautions against linking arguments on doctrine to experiences at a place (citing the example of the cult of Asklepios at Epidaurus). As for making any Protestant, conceivably polemical, points, he contents himself with saying, ‘But we [meaning Christians in general] have a surer rule of faith by which we may test anything that is offered for our acceptance as Christian dogma.’¹⁷

Bruce cut his teeth as a speaker in church, in university Christian societies and at Brethren conferences. In these settings he won people’s confidence. The fact that he was not a professional biblical scholar until almost the age of thirty-seven probably helped him to build a wide platform of trust before taking up that role. He was strongly aware of the importance of trust. He cites a remark made to him by G.T. Manley that ‘once you get a reputation for “soundness” you can write and say what you please.’¹⁸ Bruce saw A.S. Peake as illustrating the opposite tendency. Peake was written off by many conservatives because his name ‘was inseparably associated with some “way-out” positions (as they were then accounted) taken up in the one-volume Bible Commentary which he edited. Peake, in fact, was a convinced Paulinist in his theology.’¹⁹ Incidentally, notice what Bruce does here; he defends Peake against a charge, which centres on being seen as implicitly agreeing with certain critical views on Scripture, by pointing to Peake’s adherence to Paul’s gospel. As we shall see, this is indicative of Bruce.

Classicist, etc.

Bruce may have lacked formal theological training but his training as a classicist was extremely thorough, and was allied to a breadth of academic interest that led him to expertise in a very wide range of related fields. He went to the University of Aberdeen in 1928 to study for four years, primarily in Latin and Greek. There he met Betty Davidson, also from a Brethren family. The two rapidly became close friends and married in 1935, at the first point when Fred was earning a living. (In fact, an important factor in taking the job in question was the opportunity it gave for them to marry.)²⁰ He gained his MA in 1932, together with the Gold Medal in Greek and Latin and the Fullerton Scholarship in Classics. However, all this was not enough. He decided to start again at the beginning. He gained (unsurprisingly!) an entrance scholarship to Caius College, Cambridge, and went to read for the BA in classics. The one concession to his previous study was that he took the degree in two years rather than three.²¹ Again, he came out as the best student in the subject.

In 1934 Bruce moved to Vienna to study Indo-European philology with Paul Kretschmer and others. This included learning Hittite and, consequently, cuneiform.

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Answers to questions* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1972), 86, 87, 141, 186, 187, 237.

¹⁷ Bruce, *Answers to questions*, 237.

¹⁸ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 57.

¹⁹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 59.

²⁰ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 42-3, 96-7.

²¹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 63-4.

Vienna proved to be an education in more than the academic sense. Naziism was rife among the students. Armed police were posted on the doors of university buildings. Matriculating students had to sign a declaration that they were not a member of the Nazi party, or the Communists, or the Styrian Home Guard. Bruce was confident of his non-membership of any of these, whatever the third one actually was.²² He joined a Brethren fellowship. One of the members was a cousin of Hitler. The man's surname was not Hitler and he did not generally talk about the relationship. When it did become known it often struck awe into people. Despite the Austrian Government's vehement opposition to the Nazis, life in Vienna was becoming very uncomfortable for Jews.²³ One incidental effect of Bruce's time in Vienna was that the experience of Austria's severe economic difficulties, as a country made suddenly small in 1918 by the removal of its empire, turned him into an ardent lifelong advocate of the European Common Market.²⁴

Plans to return to Vienna in 1935 to work for a Ph.D. were disrupted when Bruce's attention was drawn to an advertisement for a three-year assistant lectureship in Greek at the University of Edinburgh. He obtained the post. This was followed in 1938 by a permanent post in Greek at the University of Leeds.²⁵ He taught Greek and the history of Latin. He also soon started giving classes in New Testament Greek for theology students at the university.²⁶ He remained at Leeds until 1947. During the war he was exempt from military service for health reasons, but acted as an air-raid warden and fire watcher.²⁷

Since about 1928 Bruce had been reading and buying theology books, especially in biblical studies. His choices were very eclectic. Although he enjoyed classic defences of conservative faith, he read and appreciated books of every theological viewpoint. From 1929 he also subscribed both to *The Expository Times* and to *The Evangelical Quarterly*. In 1939 shortage of money led him to compete for, and obtain, the Scottish universities' Crombie Scholarship in Biblical Criticism. He was the only candidate, but considerable preparatory work was still needed because the scholarship examination covered Pentateuchal criticism, the book of Judges in Hebrew, and both the Gospel of John and Ephesians in Greek. In 1943 Bruce also gained the Leeds University Diploma in Hebrew.²⁸ By the middle of the 1940s he had built quite a considerable, if unconventional, portfolio of evidence of knowledge relating to biblical studies. Bruce's academic interests continued to develop. To his great depth in classical scholarship he added a very wide breadth. Two indicators of this are his editorship of *Yorkshire Celtic Studies* from 1945 to 1957 and of *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* from 1957 to 1971. The second of these relates to a particular interest that he developed in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Bruce's classical training set the pattern for his biblical work. Commenting on the University of Sheffield's requirement that teaching in biblical studies should be objective,

²² Bruce, *In retrospect*, 81–3.

²³ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 83–4.

²⁴ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 87.

²⁵ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 96, 98.

²⁶ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 107, 110.

²⁷ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 110.

²⁸ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 109–10.

free from any theological bias, he writes:

It would not have occurred to me that Biblical Literature and History could be taught otherwise in an academic context; I took it for granted that my methods should be those which I had followed thus far in teaching the history and literature of ancient Greece and Rome.²⁹

Classics also gave Bruce the academic confidence to disagree with established New Testament scholars about historical issues. As Howard Marshall points out, Bruce was one of a number of classicists ‘who have directed their attention to the New Testament and reached a positive verdict on its historical worth’.³⁰ He cites Bruce’s own comment that historians wishing to use the New Testament as a historical source will not be ‘intimidated by theologians who assure them that their task is impossible and illegitimate’.³¹ In the middle of the twentieth century, the form-critical movement in New Testament scholarship combined a radically sceptical approach to the historical accuracy of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s words and actions with some astonishing leaps of historical intuition in arguing from the text to reconstructions of early church activity. It was inevitable that this kind of procedure should look very suspect to a scholar trained in more usual ways of studying Greco-Roman texts.³²

Finally, Bruce’s depth of classical knowledge, and the breadth of other subjects on which he was able to draw, meant that he could write books and articles that any scholar would find worth reading. He would illuminate a difficult Greek construction with a parallel example that one had not met before. He would offer new classical parallels to ideas in the text. He could trace the possible linguistic antecedents of a phrase in several fruitful directions. Even if a particular article or chapter of a book by Bruce does not offer a radically new overall conclusion, there will always be something new to learn in the detail. This, together with Bruce’s evident reasonableness of judgement and his accessible and gracious writing style, meant that scholars across the world encountered Bruce’s work with profit. This was true across the theological spectrum, and even among those with whom Bruce most strongly disagreed. Whatever a scholar’s views about Bruce’s theological commitments — and these commitments are generally clear on the page — none could doubt that Bruce was a scholar, a scholar whose voice was worth hearing. Biblical scholars who had viewed evangelical biblical scholarship as dead now saw that an evangelical could make a serious contribution to debate. Bruce’s success as a pioneer in this way opened up the possibilities for the generation of evangelical scholars who were to follow.

Evangelical Scholarship without Predetermined Results: Bruce on the Tyndale Fellowship

²⁹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 140.

³⁰ I. Howard Marshall, ‘Frederick Fyvie Bruce 1910–1990’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 80 (1993), 245–60 (here at 251–2).

³¹ F.F. Bruce, *New Testament history* (London: Nelson, 1969), 159 n. 1.

³² For Bruce’s view on form criticism see, for example, articles 19 to 21 in his series ‘Biblical criticism’ in *Essential Christianity* (1963).

At about the time when Bruce moved from classics to full-time biblical studies, by gaining the post of senior lecturer at Sheffield, he published a seminal statement of his approach to biblical studies. Since the publication date is 1947, I imagine that the writing of the article slightly predates the appointment. It may indicate something of what made Sheffield attractive to him. What he wrote was effectively a vision for a radically renewed evangelical scholarship. Since his article was about the newly established Tyndale Fellowship, Bruce must have seen others as sharing his vision. However, it reads to me like a personal statement. It set the agenda that Bruce followed for the rest of his career. Bruce's pursuit of this radical agenda then inspired the next generation of his students (especially his Ph.D. students) and the readers of his books.

The article, 'The Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research', was published in *The Evangelical Quarterly*,³³ a Scottish Reformed journal whose ownership had passed to the Inter-Varsity Fellowship in 1942. (It passed to The Paternoster Press in 1956, and Bruce himself edited it from 1950 to 1980.)³⁴ In the first half of the paper Bruce gives a historical sketch running from an initial meeting in 1938 to the creation of the Fellowship in January 1945.

Bruce's interpretation of the first 1938 meeting (at which he was not present) is worth noting:

In May 1938 some senior members and friends of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions met in the house of one of their number in London to consider how best the reproach of obscurantism and anti-intellectual prejudice might be removed from Evangelical Christianity in England. How far this reproach was justified is a question outside the scope of this paper; at any rate, it was widely believed that Evangelicals were afraid of scholarship, especially Biblical and theological scholarship, and Evangelicals in England did not always act in such a way as to explode this belief.³⁵

This differs in an interesting way from Douglas Johnson's later recollection of the purpose of the meeting at which, as General Secretary of the IVF, he was a prime mover.³⁶ He recalls the aims as being more pragmatic: to provide up-to-date theological literature suitable to the needs of evangelical students and to equip evangelicals to compete for senior appointments in the theological and educational establishment. Both these required steps to be taken to encourage and facilitate the training of evangelical biblical scholars at a high academic level (biblical studies was identified from the beginning as the key field into which to channel effort).³⁷ Bruce's and Johnson's understandings of the meeting are not incompatible. However, one can already see Bruce wanting to reshape English evangelicalism rather than simply provide resources to support its existing approaches.

³³ F.F. Bruce, 'The Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research', *The Evangelical Quarterly* 19:1 (1947), 52–61.

³⁴ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 184–7.

³⁵ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 52.

³⁶ Douglas Johnson, 'The origin and history of Tyndale House' (unpublished paper, 1980), 3. In fact, Johnson's date for the meeting (7 June) differs from that of Bruce. Johnson is presumably correct on this.

³⁷ Johnson, 'Tyndale House', 1–4.

As a consequence of that meeting, a Biblical Research Committee was established to try to implement the meeting's agenda. In the absence of any sympathetic New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce, as a classics lecturer who was widely read in biblical studies and was evangelical, was called upon to act as the academic expert in the New Testament field. Following a meeting of the committee in October 1938, Bruce was commissioned to write a commentary on the Greek text of the Acts of the Apostles.³⁸ Bruce was invited to join the committee during a conference held at Kingham Hill School, Oxfordshire, in July 1941, 'two or three weeks after Hitler's attack on Russia'.³⁹ Johnson gives a copy of the programme. It was headed 'Revival of biblical theology', an indication of the ambitious ideas of the group. Bruce was listed as speaking on 'Resources: senior men'.⁴⁰ Bruce records the three key decisions of the conference as being: to hold an annual summer school; to found annual lectures in Old Testament and New Testament; and to secure a residential centre and library for biblical research. Bruce delivered the inaugural New Testament lecture, on 'The speeches in the Acts of the Apostles', in December 1942.⁴¹

The first tangible result of Bruce's involvement with this attempt to revive evangelical scholarship was the publication, in 1943, of a short book, *Are the New Testament documents reliable?* It was everything that the Inter-Varsity Fellowship was hoping for in calling on Bruce's help. In it, he showed that, by the norms of classical scholarship, the New Testament texts as we have them today have an excellent claim to authenticity and general reliability. The book has gone through innumerable reprints and several editions, and has been translated into (at least) German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese and Swedish.⁴²

In September 1944 a house at 16 Selwyn Gardens, Cambridge, was bought to be the planned residential centre and library. It was given the name Tyndale House. Bruce and others had been working hard at collecting books since 1941 and so there was already a good nucleus for the library.⁴³ In January 1945 the group of men and women who had become interested in pursuing the objectives of the Biblical Research Committee was constituted as the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research.⁴⁴ Bruce chaired the Biblical Research Committee from 1942 to 1951. He chaired the Fellowship's New Testament study group for many years. Bruce is one of four people whom Douglas Johnson singles out as being people to whom 'All aspects of the initial and subsequent planning in the meetings of the Biblical Research

Committee and the actual work at the House owe an immense debt'.⁴⁵ It is characteristic of Bruce that, although he was not one of the group that came up

³⁸ Johnson, 'Tyndale House', 4; Bruce, *In retrospect*, 123; F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: the Greek text with introduction and commentary* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1951), with various later editions.

³⁹ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 53; Bruce, *In retrospect*, 123.

⁴⁰ Johnson, 'Tyndale House', 6.

⁴¹ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 53-54. This lecture was published by The Tyndale Press in 1943.

⁴² F.F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament documents reliable?* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1943). For bibliographic data up to 1969 see W. Ward Gasque, 'A select bibliography of the writings of F.F. Bruce', in *Apostolic history*, eds Gasque and Martin, 21-34.

⁴³ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 54-55.

⁴⁴ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 55.

⁴⁵ Johnson, 'Tyndale House', 23-4.

with the initial ideas that led to Tyndale House and the Tyndale Fellowship, he ended up putting a great deal of work into bringing them about and helping them succeed.

The second half of Bruce's article sets out his understanding of the nature of the Tyndale Fellowship. It is here that the radical edge to Bruce's vision for the renewal of evangelical biblical scholarship becomes visible. After setting out the general outlook, aim and endeavours of the Fellowship (which, interestingly, includes 'to urge the claims of Biblical studies to a permanent and influential place in the national system of education'),⁴⁶ he turns to deal at length with the charge that the Fellowship is bound to be 'obscurantist': 'Does not its acceptance of the I.V.F. Doctrinal Basis commit it *ipso facto* to an unprogressive "Fundamentalism" (to employ what Principal Maclean aptly called "a refined theological swearword"!)?'⁴⁷

Bruce's defence is basically twofold. First, he argues that the Inter-Varsity Fellowship doctrinal basis is not obscurantist. He does so by defining its terms very carefully:

... the I.V.F. Doctrinal Basis ... is simply a summary, in untheological language, of the Protestant faith as exhibited in its chief formularies. The Basis has frequently been criticised for explicitly predicating 'infallibility' of Holy Scripture as originally given, as well as its divine inspiration and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. But *Evangelical Belief*, the *official* interpretation of the Basis, explains this 'infallibility' to mean 'that the Scriptures themselves, in their proper sense, never lead astray the soul who is sincerely seeking truth' (1st edition, p. 10). The words, 'in their proper sense', necessarily imply that each part of the Bible must be viewed in the light of the whole, and that the Old Testament must be read in the light of the New. There is nothing obscurantist in this position.⁴⁸

He adds a footnote which further explains his understanding of 'infallibility': 'The word is strictly equivalent to Gk. ἀσφαλεια, used in Luke i. 4 (translated "certainty" in A.V. and R.V.); and the interpretation quoted above from *Evangelical Belief* gives the precise meaning of the term. Later on the same page we read: "By using the word 'infallibility' in reference to Holy Scripture, we mean that it is in itself a true and complete guide, and requires no external correction by Church or Tradition."⁴⁹

All this appears to put Bruce on the less conservative side of many debates about 'inerrancy'. However, an address by him to the Victoria Institute in the previous year makes it clear that he does not see the Bible as reliable in only the religious sphere:

It is commonly supposed that, provided we recognise the authority of Scripture in the realm of religion and morals, we need not trouble if it proves to err in other respects, such as matters of history. Since, however, the God of the Bible has revealed Himself in history, we may well expect the record of His revelation to be historically trustworthy ...⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 55-6.

⁴⁷ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 56.

⁴⁸ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 56-7, citing *Evangelical belief* (Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1936).

⁴⁹ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship'. 57 n.1.

⁵⁰ F.F. Bruce, 'What do we mean by biblical inspiration?', *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* lxxviii (1946), 121-39 (here at 124).

In the same paper he tackles the term ‘verbal inspiration’. He accepts it as being ‘unexceptionable’ as long as it is not understood as implying dictation.⁵¹ However, in a written reply to questions from members, he makes his caution about the term clear and ends his reply on an unusually passionate note:

I agree ... that one needs to be very careful in using the expression ‘Verbal Inspiration’ [because of explicit or implicit dictation ideas]. I have only on this one occasion made public use of it feeling that before this learned society there was less likelihood of being misunderstood than before the general public; and even so I judged it wise to safeguard myself by making my meaning perfectly plain. It is monstrous to make the expression a test of orthodoxy, as some do.⁵²

So, Bruce’s first defence of the Tyndale Fellowship against the charge of obscurantism is effectively to argue that an evangelical view of Scripture, even when it uses the term ‘infallibility’, is not such as to exclude open academic study. His second defence reinforces that point by arguing that evangelical study of the Bible does not prejudge critical questions.

He begins this point by contrasting the approach of the Tyndale Fellowship with that of Roman Catholic scholars of those days. He describes several cases in which scholars foreclosed consideration of critical issues because their conclusions were dictated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. He cites E.J. Kissane on the composition of Isaiah, Abbot Chapman on the priority of Matthew, Ronald Knox on including the Trinitarian 1 John 5:7 in his translation of the New Testament, and M.J. Lagrange on the apostolic authorship of John’s Gospel.⁵³ Bruce is adamant: ‘No such conclusions are prescribed for members of the Tyndale Fellowship.’⁵⁴ He then goes on to specify key examples.

In such critical *crucis*, for example, as the codification of the Pentateuch, the composition of Isaiah, the date of Daniel, the sources of the Gospels, or the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles, each of us is free to hold and proclaim the conclusions to which all the available evidence points. Any research worthy of the name, we take it for granted, must necessarily be unfettered.

Evangelical Christians must, once and for all, give the lie to the common idea that they are afraid of scientific research. If the idea were true, it would say little for the strength of such people’s personal faith. But it must not even *seem* to be true. Of course, if our premises are intellectually untenable, the sooner we know it the better; but if we are convinced that our position is impregnably secure, then we shall welcome all the light that science and scholarship have to throw upon it, whether coming from friendly or from hostile quarters, in order that it may be *seen* to be impregnably secure. The early Christians challenged the closest scrutiny of their claims: ‘this thing’, they gladly asserted, ‘was not done in a corner’. We wish to be of their spirit.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Bruce, ‘Biblical inspiration’, 126.

⁵² Bruce, ‘Biblical inspiration’, 136-7.

⁵³ Bruce, ‘Tyndale Fellowship’, 58 and 59 n. 1.

⁵⁴ Bruce, ‘Tyndale Fellowship’, 58.

⁵⁵ Bruce, ‘Tyndale Fellowship’, 58-9.

Bruce's confidence in the Scriptures shines through this. He is sure that academic study, as long as it is not based on presuppositions (such as the impossibility of miracles) that determine its results, will do nothing to undermine basic Christian beliefs. This was not an ignorant confidence. He had been reading critical biblical scholarship since his late teens.⁵⁶ The confidence must have been the result of both his Christian faith and his experience of reading the Bible and biblical scholars for about twenty years. During his subsequent career, some of the secondary supports to his confidence must have been knocked away. In the Victoria Institute paper he quotes recent statements by both W.F. Albright, 'There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament tradition', and F.G. Kenyon, 'Both the *authenticity* and the *general integrity* of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as firmly established.'⁵⁷ As long-time editor of *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, Bruce will have come to realize that the first statement, at least, was problematic. However, as we shall see, this basic confidence in the Bible and academic study of it was still there at the end of Bruce's career. It was then expressing itself in the kind of way that worried Oliver Barclay. However, Bruce's willingness to take the Bible as he found it, irrespective of Christian dogma, was, in principle, fully in place at the point when the Tyndale Fellowship was founded, and when Bruce took up his first biblical studies post.

Sheffield, Writing and Hard Work

In 1947 a freak event transformed Bruce's career. In a move that has never happened elsewhere in Britain, the University of Sheffield decided to set up a department for study of the Bible. The university did not have, and does not have, any other department of religious studies or theology. There was just the Department of Biblical History and Literature (now the Department of Biblical Studies). This bold act of creation has proved justified. The department has a worldwide reputation and must be one of the university's most successful in research and in attracting Ph.D. students.

Beginning a department from scratch is a curious endeavour. It was particularly so in this case because biblical studies has usually been wedded to theology and has grown up with church involvement. At Sheffield they wanted 'non-doctrinal' biblical studies and, particularly among those in the university who had opposed the creation of the department, there was a strong determination 'that it should not provide a bridgehead for any ecclesiastical authority'.⁵⁸ All this created a uniquely favourable situation for an applicant who was not ordained by any church and who was a classicist, without theological training but with plenty of evidence of the skills needed to handle the Bible's history and literature. Bruce applied, was interviewed (along with two Presbyterian ministers) and appointed as senior lecturer with the task of setting up the new department. A second lecturer (Aileen Guilding) was appointed a year later.⁵⁹ The department grew

⁵⁶ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 58–9, 131–6.

⁵⁷ Bruce, 'Biblical inspiration', 124, citing W.F. Albright, *Archaeology and the religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1942), 176, and F.G. Kenyon, *The Bible and archaeology* (London: G.G. Harrap & Co., 1940), 289.

⁵⁸ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 139.

⁵⁹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 139–42.

and Bruce was made professor in 1955.

As someone without theological training, Bruce would, I think, never have secured a job in an established biblical studies department in a British university. Appointments committees would have been highly suspicious of this man with close links to the Inter-Varsity Fellowship and no links to the theological establishment. Without Sheffield, Bruce would either have stayed as an undistinguished classicist — too much of his research energy was being diverted into biblical studies⁶⁰ — or might have been appointed at some point to an evangelical theological college. In either case, his main contributions to the development of evangelical biblical scholarship would not have been made.

Bruce was overjoyed to be able to devote himself to biblical studies full time.⁶¹ He relished the theological freedom that teaching in a secular university department gave him. He also got into his stride as a writer.

My impression, from a survey of the excellent bibliographies of Bruce's writings (up to 1979) compiled by Ward Gasque,⁶² is that Bruce always had under way one or two major projects, such as commentaries, and wrote shorter pieces generally on request. A significant piece of evidence for this pattern is the relative dearth of articles in prestigious journals to which one has to submit work and wait for approval. I do not think that this was because of any lack of scholarly regard for Bruce: the large number of requests that he received to contribute to *Festschriften* for major scholars tells against that. Rather, it is clear both that Bruce felt a commitment to write regularly for a number of evangelical journals and that he did receive numerous requests to which he acceded. One frequent type of short piece was the classic request item: the dictionary article. Bruce contributed on a wide range of topics to major works of this kind from every theological stable.

Bruce's books mainly fall into two types: commentaries and historical studies. The commentaries range from the very technical to the popular. They cover most of the Pauline letters, Acts, Hebrews, the Johannine letters and the Gospel of John. Bruce's historical books run from the later part of the Old Testament, through the New Testament, into the early church, and on to the development of the English Bible. He was also one of the earliest writers to make a significant contribution to Qumran studies.

The major book from Bruce's mature years, *Paul: Apostle of the free spirit* (or, in some editions: *Apostle of the heart set free*), shows something of why Bruce was so influential, as well as some of the strengths and limitations of his writing. The book is a historical study of Paul's life, interlaced with discussions of his key ideas. The introduction grasps the reader with an eloquent account of Paul's significance and the key elements of his gospel. Despite Bruce's book being drawn from university lectures, the introduction is accessible to anyone and would, I am sure, draw many readers to read on. What the introduction does not do is to explain Bruce's method. Most startling to me, as the inheritor of Bruce's Paul course at Manchester, is that, apart from a reference to the

⁶⁰ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 138.

⁶¹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 142.

⁶² The bibliographies compiled by W. Ward Gasque are: 'A select bibliography [1933–69]', in *Apostolic history*, eds Gasque and Martin, 21–34; 'A supplementary bibliography of the writings of F.F. Bruce', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 21–47; and 'A select bibliography of the writings of F.F. Bruce 1970–1979', in *Pauline studies: essays presented to Professor F.F. Bruce on his 70th birthday*, eds Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter: The Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), xxii–xxxvi.

‘high historical value’ of Acts,⁶³ there is no statement about what evidence Bruce will use to build his picture of Paul. The first discussion of authenticity of any of the letters attributed to Paul comes on page 395. Curiously, Bruce ends his comments on Acts with a note which, among other things, commends the importance of Philipp Vielhauer’s article, ‘On the “Paulinism” of Acts’.⁶⁴ Bruce notes that Vielhauer ‘defends quite different conclusions ... from mine’.⁶⁵ In the remaining 450 pages of the book, however, Bruce only once engages with an argument from Vielhauer’s article, and then only briefly. Bruce does refer his readers to more technical defences of his approach to Acts. However, Bruce’s Paul is designed to be accessible to quite a wide audience as well as to biblical studies undergraduates. The wider audience will not have access to the technical articles. Since Bruce thinks that the work of scholars who would question his whole approach is important, he ought surely to explain to his wider readership what it is of the other scholars’ challenges that he thinks to be important, and why he regards his approach as being the appropriate one.

Part of the answer to this is that Bruce has an instinct for narrative art, and he probably thinks that he will lose his audience’s attention if he engages in complex discussion of method. He is probably right. His feel for narrative also leads him to carry the story forward in a series of crisp, short chapters (such as chapter nine, ‘Persecutor of the church’, four-and-a-half pages), although he also keeps putting in interesting detail that would keep even the scholars reading (for example, despite its brevity, chapter nine still finds time to talk about a Jewish chronological scheme of three ages, for which Bruce gives both primary and secondary references). He also does tackle a fair number of scholarly challenges to his views: for example, where he does engage with Vielhauer on the Areopagus speech.⁶⁶

Bruce seems to choose quite carefully where, and where not, to challenge his readers to think about the Bible in new ways. In *Paul*, he treads very lightly in dealing with, for example, the authorship of the pastoral epistles. He does not really express a clear opinion of his own.⁶⁷ On the other hand, when he writes about Paul’s ideas on the life to come, he decides to stretch his evangelical readers quite considerably, by talking at some length about what he sees as quite a significant change in Paul’s thinking. This, I expect, is the case about which Barclay raises the objection quoted above. Bruce argues that the experience of nearly dying in Ephesus (referred to in 2 Corinthians 1:8–10) caused Paul not only to change his assessment of the likelihood of living until the Parousia but also to develop the idea that the immortal body, which 1 Corinthians 15 promised at the Parousia, would actually be available immediately after death. This would enable fellowship with Christ to continue without the interruption of the grave.⁶⁸

In one of his last articles Bruce comments on the criticism that this evoked:

I recall a reviewer’s concern when I once endeavoured to trace from Paul’s letters the

⁶³ Bruce, *Paul*, 16. Citations are from the 1980 revised edition.

⁶⁴ Philipp Vielhauer, ‘On the “Paulinism” of Acts’, in *Studies in Luke-Acts: essays presented in honor of Paul Schubert*, eds Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1966), 33-50.

⁶⁵ Bruce, *Paul*, 16 n. 4.

⁶⁶ Bruce, *Paul*, 243-6.

⁶⁷ Bruce, *Paul*, 442-4.

⁶⁸ Bruce, *Paul*, 310-313

development of his thought about immortality and the life to come. I implied, he said, that Paul changed his mind. That Paul changed his mind on a variety of things is admitted by himself: what my reviewer found unacceptable was the thought that he could have changed his mind from one letter to another. But this is to force an artificial distinction between his speech and his writing. Paul claimed no more authority for his letters than for his oral teaching: when he taught as Christ's apostle to the Gentiles, the medium made no difference to the authority behind his words.⁶⁹

Bruce may have reached historical conclusions that he had not envisaged when he wrote his 'manifesto' for the Tyndale Fellowship in 1947. However, the principle that no historical conclusions were barred was set out right back then. I think that Oliver Barclay is probably wrong (although he knew Bruce well, whereas I never met him) in the impression of development that he gives by saying that Bruce 'eventually came to hold that the apostle Paul was in error on at least one major point'.⁷⁰ Bruce reached a series of historical conclusions in his career, several of which were controversial among evangelicals. His approach did not, in principle, change over time. Barclay also makes the broader point that academic theological study has been rationalistic and that evangelicals who engage in it tend to get drawn into rationalism, losing the idea of a revealed theology.⁷¹ John Wenham, similarly, went from initial astonishment that James Barr did not categorize Bruce as a fundamentalist in the book *Fundamentalism*⁷² to agreement with Barr in seeing Bruce as a 'conservative liberal': 'In other words his thought was governed by a deep faith in Christ, which did not include belief in any clearly formulated doctrine of Scripture.'⁷³

Much needs untangling here. One of Bruce's own responses would have been to distinguish sharply between rationalism and rationality. For Bruce, 'rationalist' assumptions are primarily anti-supernaturalist ones.⁷⁴ Bruce would argue that he could be rational without holding such a viewpoint. Another point to make is that, in *Paul* and many of his other books, Bruce was writing history. He therefore had to be governed by the canons of historical study. By that, I do not mean the canons of particularly scholarly fashions of the day, but the inevitable basic rules of trying to investigate past events. This does mean arguing for 'only what can be rationally justified', to use a phrase of Barclay.⁷⁵ Whatever doctrine of Scripture Bruce did or did not hold, it would not affect the outcome of historical argument. However, this never meant that Bruce did not believe in revelation. **He was quite prepared to believe and act on something simply because 'our Lord and the apostles taught' it.**⁷⁶ One has only to read Bruce's *Paul* to feel how strongly he was committed to the gospel that the Apostle taught — committed because Bruce believed that the message came from the Apostles, Jesus and, ultimately,

⁶⁹ F.F. Bruce, 'Scripture in relation to tradition and reason', in *Scripture, tradition and reason*, eds Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 35-64 (here at 42).

⁷⁰ Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, 129. In fact, presuming that he is indeed referring to the chapter of *Paul* that we are discussing, Bruce does not present this issue in as stark terms as Barclay implies that he does.

⁷¹ Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, 129.

⁷² James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

⁷³ John Wenham, *Facing hell: the story of a nobody: an autobiography 1913-1996* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 195-6.

⁷⁴ Bruce, 'Tyndale Fellowship', 57.

⁷⁵ Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, 129.

⁷⁶ Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain*, 129.

God.

I do not want to give the impression that Bruce's career was dogged by controversy. Far from it. His books strengthened the faith of evangelicals, and evangelicals were delighted with them. Contrary voices were relatively few. The more general view is expressed by Howard Mudditt. As proprietor of The Paternoster Press he was, alongside Wm B. Eerdmans in the United States, Bruce's main publisher. Mudditt goes so far as to commend Bruce as a partner in publishing by pointing out that he 'never lets his partner down by introducing some quirk of exegesis or opinion which will at best detract from the value of the book, and at worst will arouse a storm of controversy'.⁷⁷

Mudditt also draws attention to Bruce's great reliability in producing manuscripts on time. He recounts Bruce's response to his request to write *The dawn of Christianity*:⁷⁸

To my surprise and pleasure the reply came back, 'Yes, I will write the book you ask for, and the typescript will reach you on the 30th June.' I had received letters like that before from different authors, but on this occasion, *mirabile dictu*, the manuscript did arrive, not on the date when the author said, but the day before!⁷⁹

The manuscript was also so meticulously prepared that, as Mudditt said, he could have sent it to the printer without reading a comma in it. This timeliness and care was Mudditt's consistent experience of Bruce.⁸⁰

There is a common view that the person who shouts loudest usually gets their way. It is even more true that, other things being equal, the writer or speaker who does the most work will have the greatest influence. Bruce did a staggering amount of work. Most famously, he proofread the entire English translation of the *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, which takes up a considerable length of shelf space. He read, and often wrote prefaces for, very many manuscripts by younger scholars. He edited several journals at once and wrote countless reviews. Alan Millard told me that once, when reading *The Evangelical Quarterly*, he noticed that, alongside the usual plethora of reviews signed 'FFB', there was now quite a number with the unknown signature 'RP'. When he next saw Bruce, he asked who 'RP' was. Bruce, with a gleam in his eye, replied, 'Rylands Professor!'⁸¹ Oliver Barclay, in his 1971 appreciation of Bruce, writes:

At one stage (perhaps still) he had a reputation for answering requests by return of post, usually with a completed MS which he had sat up half the night to finish. He must have saved the day for many magazine and symposium editors who, when let down by other authors, turned to F.F.B. and did not ask in vain. One wonders if the Inter-Varsity Press's *New Bible Commentary* and *New Bible Dictionary* could have appeared in anything like the time and shape that they did without his herculean back room efforts.⁸²

Adding to all this his regular contributions in writing columns such as 'Answers

⁷⁷ B. Howard Mudditt, 'A publishing partnership', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 19–20.

⁷⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The dawn of Christianity* (London: The Paternoster Press, 1950).

⁷⁹ Mudditt, 'A publishing partnership', 19.

⁸⁰ Mudditt, 'A publishing partnership', 19.

⁸¹ I am grateful to Alan Millard for permission to include this.

⁸² Barclay, 'F.F. Bruce and the Inter-Varsity Fellowship', 20.

to questions', as well as university teaching and administration, church responsibilities as an elder, and a growing list of speaking engagements, the result is an amount of hard work of which I can only stand in awe.

Manchester, Teaching and Scholarly Autonomy

After twelve years as head of department at Sheffield and four years as professor, Bruce was a strong candidate for the Rylands Chair at Manchester, made vacant by the sad death of T.W. Manson. However, Bruce was clearly not the first to be approached by the appointments committee. As he himself notes with self-deprecating humour, 'from the fact that a full year elapsed before they made contact with me, it might be inferred that by that time they had begun to scrape the bottom of the barrel.'⁸³

As Bruce comments elsewhere, the confidentiality of interview panels is always carefully preserved.⁸⁴ However, since this is a collection of papers about the Rylands Chair, it might be worth recounting what could be a completely apocryphal incident (but which I have heard about from two very different sources). It is said that John A.T. Robinson, later of *Honest to God* fame, was interviewed for the chair. It is said that one of the interviewers asked Robinson about the Hebrew of a passage from the Dead Sea Scrolls on which he had published. Robinson, it appears, replied that he did not read Hebrew. Stunned silence: especially since the Rylands Chair is technically in the criticism and exegesis of the whole Bible.

Bruce recalls his own interview as a pleasant occasion. He sensed the support of H.H. Rowley, whom he knew from the Society for Old Testament Study. In fact, he comments that 'more than once when I was asked a question Professor Rowley answered it for me before I could do so for myself!'⁸⁵ Bruce left Sheffield with great sadness. He felt that he had developed 'an almost proprietorial relation' with the department there. However, as he commented, that was probably a good reason that there should be a break.⁸⁶ Bruce settled happily into the Faculty of Theology at Manchester. Also happily, as he noted, 'I had always found myself in agreement with T.W. Manson over such a wide area of biblical study that students were not conscious of any such abrupt change of course as sometimes takes place with a new appointment.'⁸⁷

Many have commented that Bruce was a rather dry lecturer.⁸⁸ He sometimes even read from manuscripts of books, correcting the work as he went along.⁸⁹ There may be an indication of the degree of sophistication of his lecturing skills in the comment he makes on one of his own lecturers: '[A.E.] Housman I remember as a patient and considerate lecturer, who would write an unfamiliar German name or word on the blackboard for the

⁸³ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 202.

⁸⁴ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 139.

⁸⁵ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 165, 203.

⁸⁶ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 204.

⁸⁷ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 205.

⁸⁸ Marshall, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce 1910–1990', 259; cf. F. Roy Coad, 'F.F. Bruce: his influence on Brethren in the British Isles', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 13–15 (here at 14).

⁸⁹ Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce: two appreciations, II', in *Pauline studies*, eds Hagner and Harris, xx.

benefit of students who might not otherwise get it right.’⁹⁰ However, some students clearly appreciated his teaching. David Payne was Bruce’s first biblical studies degree student at Sheffield. He recalls Bruce’s ‘clarity and lucidity’, noting that he ‘came out well from any comparison with one’s other lecturers and teachers’. The lectures were ‘meaty’ but erudition was ‘somewhat disguised by his ease of delivery’. Payne notes that Bruce scrupulously observed the spirit of Sheffield’s law of non-doctrinal teaching:

A breadth and a choice of viewpoint were always offered, and offered in the most objective way; at the same time, shrewd and sensible criteria were presented, so that the student was not left befogged by a vast and conflicting mass of undigested opinions. This technique had the effect of forcing one to think for oneself, to reach one’s own conclusions, and to learn facility in applying criteria. At the same time, it gave one opportunity to adjust one’s thinking to unpalatable facts or theories, without losing one’s spiritual balance.⁹¹

Payne also comments on Bruce’s engagement with students individually: encouraging, kind, wise, but shrewd and not uncritical.⁹² This takes us on to the most notable aspect of Bruce’s teaching at Manchester, his large number of Ph.D. students. The British academic system, in which universities do not themselves fund many of their research students, means that some lecturers end up with a considerable number (George Brooke, who now occupies the Rylands Chair, is currently a case in point). Bruce drew students from around the world. Donald Hagner, from the United States, and Murray Harris, from New Zealand, found him to be a welcoming supervisor who led ‘unobtrusively’, freely giving suggestions but never forcing them upon a student. He was ‘a constant source of inspiration and an unfailing standard of quality’. He had a great concern for detail but always corrected any student blunders with gentleness:

One such student recalls an occasion when he made an error in the transcription of the unpointed Hebrew of a phrase from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Citing the passage in full from memory, the Professor drew attention to the error with the gentle remark ‘You will remember the whole text runs like this ...’⁹³

In my conversations with people about Bruce, such anecdotes of his remarkable memory have come up again and again.

Much of the current article has focused on the United Kingdom. Consideration of the list of his Ph.D. students is the most obvious way of showing something of the global influence that he has had on evangelical scholarship. Tens of thousands of students around the world have been taught by students of Bruce. If we just take the former students who contributed to his 1980 Festschrift, the roll-call is very impressive: W. Ward Gasque, Colin J. Hemer, Paul Garnet, E. Margaret Howe, Peter T. O’Brien, Swee-Hwa Quek, David Wenham, Stephen S. Smalley, Ronald E. Clements, Bruce A. Demarest, Donald A. Hagner, Paul Beasley-Murray, Moisés Silva, John W. Drane,

⁹⁰ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 66-7.

⁹¹ David F. Payne, ‘F.F. Bruce as a teacher’, *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 15-16.

⁹² David F. Payne, ‘F.F. Bruce as a teacher’, *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 22 (1971), 16.

⁹³ Hagner and Harris, ‘Frederick Fyvie Bruce: two appreciations, II’, xx.

Robert H. Gundry, Ronald Y.-K. Fung and Murray J. Harris.

Another expression of Bruce's global influence was the long series of invitations to give special lectures, beginning with the Free University of Amsterdam in 1957, then further afield in 1958, principally to the then Gordon Divinity School and to Calvin College and Seminary, but in fact to many other places too. The pattern continued and developed. Bruce's books, too, were being read around the world, as is memorably described by David Clines:

Imagine, if you will, a fifteen-year-old schoolboy each morning on the 7.55 train to Central Station, Sydney, perched for the sake of the air by the open doorway of the crowded, swaying commuter train, every moment in risk of his life but keeping his balance with his shoulderblades against the handrail, immersed in, first, *The Dawn of Christianity*, then *The Growing Day*, and finally *Light in the West*. Imagine also, more difficult, the frisson of naughtiness in reading morning after morning about the history of the 'Church', that travesty of true Christianity, but here recounted sympathetically, engagingly, un-put-downably, by one of the chosen, who should have known better, in a way, but was unafraid to tell the truth, disarmingly and unfailingly lucidly.⁹⁴

Clines's references to the 'Church' and 'the chosen' reflect, of course, his memory of a fifteen-year-old Brethren member's view of the great lapsed ecclesiastical monster from which the Brethren had so astutely separated themselves. (In fact, most Open Brethren congregations today work closely with churches of other denominations. Some are even prime movers in local ecumenical organizations.)

Both Sheffield and Manchester gave Bruce a scholarly autonomy that he would have found hard to achieve in many theological colleges or, indeed, in some universities. He realized that some friends thought that he might be hampered by working in a secular university. He was sure that this was not the case:

... to teach this subject of all subjects in the academic freedom which we value so highly, *nullius addictus iurare in verba magistri* ['Not bound by oath to the teaching of any master' (Horace, Epistles i, 1.14)], is the most rewarding and exhilarating work in the world.

What is meant by the 'academic freedom' to which I have referred? It means that in the teaching and study of the Bible, as in the teaching and study of any other subject, one is not bound to follow any particular school of thought or promote any particular party line. It means that one's only commitment is to truth, that one is free to follow the evidence wherever it leads, in an atmosphere of free enquiry. There are biblical and theological schools which are instituted to foster one particular system of doctrine or to train men and women for the ministry of one particular denomination. It is natural and proper that such schools should include in their constitution an outline of beliefs or practices to which teachers, if not students, are expected to subscribe. ... I have friends and colleagues who teach in schools like these, and for the most part they do not appear to be conscious of any limitation on their freedom. But I am thankful that the lines have fallen to me in a university environment and not in that of a theological college.

There are some theological colleges which, in conformity with their constitution, will employ

⁹⁴ David J.A. Clines, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce, 1910–1990: in memoriam', *Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship* 123 (August 1991), 53–4; currently available on the University of Sheffield web site (www.sheffield.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Bruce.html).

none but conservatives; there are others in which a conservative would be very unlikely to secure a teaching appointment. But in a British university it is quite irrelevant whether a man is conservative or liberal in theology; what matters is his scholarship and his ability to teach. (I know some people who think that even ability to teach is irrelevant, but I do not agree with them.)⁹⁵

My own experience is that the scholarly autonomy at British universities is real. Bruce was maybe a little optimistic over the neutrality of appointments committees. It is true that conservatives, liberals, and all shades in between, are spread right across the British university system. However, it is the case, at least statistically, that there are departments in which conservatives have more frequently been appointed and those in which that has happened much less often. Having said that, it is an element of Bruce's own legacy (alongside other factors) that the British New Testament Society is astonishingly lacking in polarization. Despite having members from right across the theological spectrum, there is, as far as I can see, no tendency to divide into theological camps. The Society more or less post-dates Bruce, but I do think that a particularly attractive aspect of his character and approach has had a lasting effect on the way in which discourse is carried out between evangelicals and others in biblical scholarship in Britain. To this final topic we will now turn.

'Since all are my brothers and friends, I say "Peace be with you!"'

This quotation from Psalm 122 is included with the dedication of Bruce's autobiography, *In retrospect*, 'to my companions on the way'. In a subtle way, it is doubly indicative because Bruce, the lifelong member of the Brethren, can be seen to appreciate, and presumably be a frequent user of, the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible. Bruce did not win acceptance for evangelicals among biblical scholars just by impressing them with his scholarship. He won it also by befriending people and always showing care, respect and appreciation. When Bruce came on the scholarly scene, many scholars will have had experience of evangelicals as isolationist, defensive and argumentative. Bruce was none of these. Even when very clearly disagreeing with another scholar's viewpoint, he did so with great graciousness.

The note on which he ends his 1947 article on the Tyndale Fellowship is striking:

The need for renewed efforts in Biblical and theological study in the British Isles in these post-war years is all the greater because of the eclipse — temporary, we may well pray — of these studies in Germany. When we contemplate the magnificent wealth of contributions to Biblical research made over so many years in Germany, it is with a sense of appalling loss that we learn that, at the time of writing, not one periodical devoted to Biblical or theological learning is being published in that land. ... There may be some people who view with equanimity or even satisfaction this eclipse of German scholarship in the Biblical field as in so many others; but the Tyndale Fellowship is of another mind. There have indeed been tendencies from time to time in German Biblical scholarship which did not commend themselves to Evangelical thought; but its present sorry plight can be regarded as nothing less than a calamity for the whole world — though not such a calamity as its plight under a triumphant Hitlerism would have been, for then the hope of an early and vigorous

⁹⁵ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 142–3.

resurrection, which we may now indulge, would have been slender indeed.⁹⁶

There then follows just a brief concluding paragraph.

Bruce would have been astonished to know that, within a couple of years, he would be meeting with German biblical scholars as colleagues in the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*. He writes that ‘One among many advantages of meeting such men in the flesh was to learn that you can never adequately judge a man by the books he writes. By reading a book one can judge the book, but to assess men and women as persons one must meet and know them as persons.’⁹⁷ He recalls how Rudolf Bultmann, ‘conducting morning prayers as president [in 1953], expressed himself with the fervour and language of the apostle Paul’.⁹⁸ Bruce was always willing to see the faith that others had. For example, he writes that:

On many points of New Testament criticism I find myself differing from such post-Bultmannians as Ernst Käsemann and Günther Bornkamm, but critical differences become insignificant in the light of their firm understanding and eloquent exposition of the Pauline gospel of justification by faith, which is the very heart of evangelical Christianity.⁹⁹

In a university department, people are not generally aware of each other’s personally held views. I would not be able to get far at all in making a description of the religious views of each of my Manchester colleagues. What colleagues notice is how you greet people in the corridor, how you do your share of the workload of the department, how you act in meetings, how you relate to people. F.F. Bruce is remembered at Manchester particularly for how he related to two people: John Allegro and S.G.F. Brandon. John Allegro was theologically poles apart from Bruce, and outspokenly so. In the early sixties there was a falling-out in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, in which Allegro taught. Bruce solved what was an acute problem by inviting Allegro to join the Department of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, to teach Old Testament and intertestamental literature. Bruce describes the event in a characteristically self-effacing way: ‘the frontiers between our department and that of Near Eastern Studies were redrawn, and in consequence we acquired John Allegro as an augmentation to our strength.’¹⁰⁰ S.G.F. Brandon was also a considerable distance from Bruce’s theological opinions. In *New Testament history* Bruce directly opposed Brandon’s major thesis that Jesus was, at least, a Zealot sympathizer. Yet Bruce and Brandon, professor of comparative religion, worked very closely together. Brandon even persuaded Bruce to address the annual meeting of the Modern Churchmen’s Union (and no doubt had to persuade the Union to have Bruce as their speaker!). When Brandon died, in 1971, it was Bruce who gave the memorial address.¹⁰¹

History and Biblical Scholarship

No religious system that tries to buck history can produce proper scholarship.

⁹⁶ Bruce, ‘Tyndale Fellowship’, 60-1

⁹⁷ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 169-70.

⁹⁸ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 169.

⁹⁹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 310.

¹⁰⁰ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 215-6

¹⁰¹ Bruce, *In retrospect*, 211.

Whether it is evangelicals dictating that the book of Daniel must all have been written in the time of Daniel, or Catholic authorities who, it appears, at certain times dictated that scholars should accept Matthew as the first Gospel written, or even liberal Christian communities for whom it may be axiomatic that Jesus was an egalitarian, any such attempt to prejudge the answers to historical questions about the Bible is liable to end up with history demonstrating forcefully that the prejudgement was wrong. In the meantime, scholarship from within that faith community will have been skewed.

F.F. Bruce was, it seems to me, set up in the 1940s as something of a historian knight-in-shining-armour, called in to do battle with the sceptical dragons. He did this job pretty well. He assumed that relatively dispassionate historical study would provide a reasonable defence, in the scholarly arena, of traditional Christian readings of key aspects of the Bible. He was proved substantially right. His work, and that of those who followed him, made a very important contribution to the change in temper of, in particular, New Testament scholarship between the beginning and end of Bruce's career. Today, a far higher proportion of scholarship is conducive to traditional Christian beliefs than was the case in the middle of the twentieth century. The most obvious expression of this is the large number of evangelical scholars who are part of the mainstream of international biblical scholarship. Evangelical voices are a regular element of scholarly discourse.

But Bruce was never merely the knight. He saw clearly that, if evangelical biblical scholarship was to develop, evangelicalism needed to change some of its assumptions. From the very beginning, when he was maybe at his most confident about slaying dragons, he realized that open historical study of the Bible was likely to challenge evangelical views on many critical issues. His greatness is that he tackled this head on. He did not do this in order to win a place for evangelicals at the academic table — although he realized that it was a pre-condition of doing so. He did it because he was convinced that a truly evangelical faith must embrace history, not shun it. He was convinced that history would not let evangelicalism down. He was convinced of this because he was convinced that Christianity was historically true.

Howard Marshall softened his point about Bruce and creativity when he came to write Bruce's obituary. He inserted an adverb, to make it, 'F.F. Bruce may not go down in history as a highly creative, original thinker.'¹⁰² In my opinion, Bruce was both highly creative and original. Agreed, you may scour his books and not find many substantial, creative, original theories. However, at a time when both tasks seemed impossible, he persuaded evangelicals to think differently about scholarship, and scholars to think differently about evangelicalism. To see things that are currently not in existence, and then to work out ways to bring them about, is the epitome of creativity and originality.

¹⁰² Marshall, 'Frederick Fyvie Bruce 1910–1990', 258.