

FREDERICK FYVIE BRUCE 1910 -1990

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From its first issues this Journal has been graced by reviews signed “F.F. Bruce”—about fifty in all. They disclose something of their writer's character and interests. Most deal with books on New Testament and related themes, some with the Old Testament, some with the Dead Sea Scrolls. All describe the contents and their author's aims and views clearly, revealing in brief comments the reviewer's mastery of all those areas of knowledge. More than anything else, they display his positive attitude. He would explain and commend the works of others, or else not write about them; negative criticism or condemnation are notably absent, and when there was little to say a humorous story was included (vol. 5 (1960) 204).

F.F. Bruce was the Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis in the University of Manchester from 1959 until 1978, and was the fourth holder of that Chair. He began his academic career as a student of classics at Aberdeen University, winning a gold medal and scholarship, taking a B.A. in Classics at Cambridge, with further awards, then moving to Vienna to pursue doctoral research on Roman slave names in 1934. Appointment to an assistant lectureship in Greek at Edinburgh in 1935 ended his research project and opened his teaching career. From Edinburgh he moved to a lectureship in Greek at Leeds in 1935. His publications were already showing his deep interest in biblical studies, so he was an appropriate choice to head the new Department of Biblical History and Literature which Sheffield University set up as an entirely secular creation in 1947. His success there was recognised by conferment of a professorship in 1955. Upon the retirement of T.W. Manson from the Rylands Chair, the Manchester authorities invited Bruce to succeed him. The invitation, he wrote to a friend, “was completely unsought, and indeed unexpected, on my part”. As a teacher, his former students report his clarity, a determination to make the subject matter intelligible, however difficult, without jargon or persiflage. They comment on his objective presentation of differing views accompanied by explanations for them and sensible criteria for evaluating all, thus stimulating individual thought and conclusions. At Sheffield and at Manchester he attracted numerous research students, each of whom received unstinted and meticulous advice and attention.

Readers of Bruce's extensive writings—well over forty books, several in more than one edition—will look in vain for novel theories or speculative hypotheses spun to exhibit the Author's intellectual calibre, the sort of work that wins momentary acclaim then is superseded. Rather, his works evaluate evidence and interpretations carefully and honestly in spare yet readable prose, lightened with amusing examples and flashes of dry wit. Yet Bruce's books are far more than compendia of facts or other men's views. In each case, on every point, the reader can be sure Bruce was giving the distillation of his own thought, having scrutinised and tested every respectable possibility (and some on the fringe of the academic world) before taking the line he preferred, and so many of his writings will serve beyond his own generation. His own thought was the product of an ability to analyse and foresee the consequences of the most complicated theses, and of a remarkable memory for whatever passed before his eyes. These facilities are well seen in

his *Tradition Old and New* (1970) where the brief, penetrating remarks on the value of current approaches to Gospel criticism deserve attention from all who have to do with such matters. Consequently, quotations occur throughout his essays from his very catholic reading, from the ancient and Christian classics, from hymns of all kinds, from Longfellow, *Alice in Wonderland*, G. K. Chesterton and the documents of the Second Vatican Council, to name a few diverse sources. And it should be noted, these are used to help the argument or stress or clarify an issue, not merely to decorate the text. His purpose was to explore the Bible and explain it. That he did pre-eminently in his commentaries. The first of these was *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, the fruit of a mind trained in classics applied to the biblical text, which has remained standard since 1951 and was recently revised (1990). Thereafter he created several readable commentaries for the serious student, of which *The Epistle to the Hebrews* is probably the richest (1964, revised edition 1990), and less technical ones for wider audiences. Beside a dozen independent commentaries, he contributed to collective commentary volumes on the whole Bible.

Primarily interested in the New Testament and its world, F. F. Bruce was well acquainted with Old Testament studies. During his time at Leeds he took a diploma in Hebrew, and he also learned Aramaic and Syriac. This knowledge was soon put to work in a popular history of the Bible (*The Books and the Parchments*, 1950) and enabled him to follow the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries and debates at first hand. He issued three monographs on them, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (1956), *The Teacher of Righteousness in the Qumran Texts* (1957) and *Biblical Exegesis in the Qumran Texts* (1959), this last being a forerunner in research on the interpretative exercises of the *pesharim*, which others have taken up more extensively. Details of Old Testament exegesis as well as the major currents of theological opinion were familiar to him as his skillful tracking of Old Testament themes in the New Testament (*This is That: The New Testament Development of Some Old Testament Themes*, 1969) and comments and footnotes in other volumes reveal. The breadth of his classical education embraced archaeology and epigraphy as essential elements in the exegesis of ancient books, and he kept abreast of current developments in all areas related to biblical studies. Editing the *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* for fifteen years helped, no doubt.

Bruce wrote lucidly on historical matters, His straightforward account of Israel's career until A.D. 70 (*Israel and the Nations*, 1963) is a useful introduction, and was followed by the more detailed *New Testament History* (1969). Earlier, he had written a balanced and insightful primer on early church history (*The Spreading Flame*, 1958, originally in three volumes, 1950-52), responding to the excessively negative position of E. W. Barnes. The historical reach of this versatile author embraced later periods, too. *The English Bible* (1961) was highly acclaimed, following its subject from Anglo-Saxon versions to the New English Bible, and was reissued in 1979 as *History of the Bible in English*, to include more recent renderings.

The *Journal of Semitic Studies* was one among a multitude for which he wrote reviews. Articles appeared in a variety, as well as essays in composite volumes, *Festschriften*, encyclopedias and Bible dictionaries. Friends and former students sought prefaces from his pen for their own books, and someone has remarked that Bruce's sentences are sometimes the best parts of those books. Editors and publishers constantly sought his advice on the suitability of manuscripts for publication and he would often aid

them by reading and correcting texts, his most extended labours in this regard being to check G.W. Bromiley's translation of G. Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (10 volumes). As an editor himself, respectively for *Yorkshire Celtic Studies* (1945-57), *The Evangelical Quarterly* from 1949 to 1980, the *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* (1949-57), as well as the *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* from 1957 to 1971, he knew the importance of correct, clean and prompt copy, and publishers testify he was a paragon in this respect himself.

Members of societies to which he belonged appreciated his regular attendance at their meetings, the papers he read, and the interventions he made. They assured him of their esteem by electing him president, both in local associations and national ones. He shared with Matthew Black the distinction of holding the presidency of both the (British) Society for Old Testament Study (1965) and the (international) Society for New Testament Study (1975). He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1973 and valued the award of the Academy's Burkitt Medal in 1979. The award that pleased him most was the honorary D.D. conferred by his *alma mater*, Aberdeen, in 1957.

In addition to all these bodies and to lecture tours abroad ("foreign travel" was the recreation he listed in his *Who's Who* entry), he was deeply involved in a number of Christian organisations, and herein we reach the mainspring of his life.

Frederick Fyvie Bruce was born at Elgin, Morayshire, on 12th October, 1910. His father, Peter, was an evangelist who encouraged his son to think for himself and accept as a biblical doctrine only what he could see for himself to be there, an influence always acknowledged. Throughout his life Bruce was faithful to the principles of the nonconformist churches known as "Open Brethren". He welcomed the autonomy of each congregation and the absence of denominational rules, saying, "in those churches I have found an atmosphere of spiritual and intellectual freedom so congenial and indeed exhilarating that I doubt if it could be matched elsewhere". He gave freely in time and thought to local congregations and to conferences held in various parts of Britain. If his speaking style was a little dry for some, he shone as a panelist. Answering questions of a practical nature as well as theological problems was evidently something he enjoyed, for he undertook the task for many years in a monthly magazine *The Harvester*. In the published volume, *Answers to Questions*, his insight into the inquirers' problems and motives is uncanny, his answers right on the mark, even to a single "No" or "Yes". Improving the life and role of members of those churches in the twentieth century was a paramount concern, but Bruce also built up a profound knowledge of the history and traditions of the movement from its inception in the 1820s. Bible study was basic to the early Brethren and they published prolifically. Bruce cites J. B. Darby, B.W. Newton, S. P. Tregelles and others in many of his books, bringing virtually unknown authors to scholarly attention. Copies of their books, with other Brethren publications, magazines and pamphlets were not always easy to find, for there was no central church administration or office to collect them, and so Bruce encouraged the formation of a Brethren Archive in the Rylands University Library.

The Open Brethren are evangelical Christians and F. F. Bruce was always open about his personal faith, believing "in the God who justifies the ungodly. To believe in Him, and nothing more nor less, is to be evangelical". That justification depends on an historic act—the death of Christ and His resurrection—and so the faith is historical. "The appeal to history is not to be avoided . . . whatever risk it involves, it is nothing like the

risk involved in an appeal to tradition isolated from history, or in an appeal to faith *in vacuo*" (*Tradition Old and New*, 173). It was the desire to nurture others who held the same beliefs that brought him to write his first book, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* (1943, revised and frequently reprinted) and to support consistently the Inter-Varsity Fellowship (now the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship) which promotes evangelical Christianity among students. In these convictions he gave wholehearted support to the creation and maintenance of Tyndale House, Cambridge, as a centre for evangelical biblical research, and to the Associated Tyndale Fellowship.

F. F. Bruce's busy life centred on the home he shared with Betty, daughter of an Aberdeen farmer, A. B. Davidson, whom he married in 1936, and with their children Iain and Sheila. The simple warm sufficiency of their Scots upbringing was shared generously with a large circle of friends, yet even as conversation flowed, the Professor might be reading proofs, adding occasional germane remarks. To those unaware of his reputation he appeared a slightly reserved, ordinary man—one guest only realised he was unusual from the great quantity of mail arriving at the breakfast table every day. That appearance reflected his nature—humble, open-hearted, ready to serve others regardless of his own interests. The way he offered a haven in his Department at Manchester to John Allegro when he could not remain in Semitic Studies in 1962 exemplifies those traits. His basic attitudes to life were those inculcated by the Apostle Paul whose life and letters were the main focus of Bruce's thinking. He wrote about him repeatedly in articles, in *Paul and his Converts* (1962), *Paul and Jesus* (1974), and outstandingly in *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (1977). He produced *An Expanded Paraphrase of the Epistles of Paul* (1966) and major commentaries on Romans (1963), Corinthians (1971), and Galatians (1982). Scholars may disagree about his interpretations, but no one who knew him can doubt that he was a twentieth century embodiment of Pauline Christianity, reflecting the life he enjoyed in Jesus his Lord.

No appreciation of F. F. Bruce can be adequate without attention to all these facets of his life. He painted a typically modest self-portrait in his autobiography *In Retrospect* (1980).

The affection, admiration and gratitude of friends and colleagues was expressed in a volume published for his sixtieth birthday (*Apostolic History and the Gospel*, 1970), his former students presented him with *Pauline Studies* in 1980, while his Manchester colleagues composed vol. 23 part 2 of this Journal for him on his retirement in 1978, and no. 22 of the *Christian Brethren Research Fellowship Journal* (1971) celebrated some of his Christian activities (with a well-judged essay "F. F. Bruce as a Biblical Scholar" by I. H. Marshall on pp. 5-18). The first and last of these volumes contain extensive bibliographies of Bruce's writings. It may be added that a volume of his essays, several being lectures he gave at the John Rylands Library, prepared to mark his eightieth birthday, has been issued under the title *A Mind for What Matters*.