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The Victoria Institute and the Bible

F.F. Bruce

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I. THE INSTITUTE AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The VICTORIA INSTITUTE is an avowedly Christian society, even if it is at the same time an investigating body. The fact that a philosophical society with a Christian basis should devote itself so unrestrictedly to investigation in every realm of human interest reflects the sturdy faith of its founders that all truth must be one, and also their complete freedom from obscurantism—from any anxiety lest their investigations might lead to the discovery of inconvenient or unpalatable facts.

The first object for which the Institute was established is stated thus: "To investigate fully and impartially the most important questions of Philosophy and Science, but more especially those that bear upon the great truths revealed in Holy Scripture; with the view of reconciling any apparent discrepancies between Christianity and Science." The place given in this statement to "the great truths revealed in Holy Scripture" suggests that the relation of this Institute to the Bible is a subject of high importance to all its members.

Some of us no doubt belong to churches or other confessional fellowships in which the doctrine of Holy Scripture is more explicitly defined; there is naturally room in such bodies only—for those who subscribe to these more explicit definitions. But the VICTORIA INSTITUTE is not a body of this kind. Our constitution recognizes "the Christian religion as revealed in Holy Scripture" without trying to define the nature of revelation or the exact content of what is revealed; just as it provides that Fellows and members of the Council shall be "professedly Christians" without trying to delimit the meaning of the term "Christian". This affords a wide basis for pursuing the researches which form the purpose of our existence, and the Institute would fall short of that purpose if it came to be identified in the public mind, or in actual fact, with one particular view of Biblical revelation or one particular Christian tradition.

But since we do acknowledge the distinctive authority of Holy Scripture, it is proper that Biblical studies should figure on our programme year by year. It would be well, too, if we made more use of the wealth of Christian Biblical scholarship available in this country. The Institute, of course, has always counted leading Biblical scholars among its members and

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officers. The list of former Presidents includes the name of Dr. Henry Wace, Dean of Canterbury, and more recently that of Sir Frederic Kenyon. Sir Frederic did not think of himself as a Biblical scholar, but it is widely recognized that his contributions to Biblical scholarship were of the highest value.

A study of the back numbers of our Transactions, however, shows that not infrequently matters of Biblical scholarship have been dealt with by men whose special claims to eminence did not lie in the Biblical field at all; and sometimes (it must be said) the results were not such as to raise the prestige of the Institute. We should immediately realize the un-wisdom of inviting a specialist in Biblical philology to discourse on (say) organic evolution,

but the equal unwisdom of inviting a distinguished biologist to read a paper on (say) the Seventy Weeks of Daniel has not always been appreciated (as it certainly would be to-day).

I have long been struck by the widespread view that any man's opinion on Biblical subjects is as valid as any other man's, but the prevalence of this idea has been brought home to me with special force since I exchanged the teaching of classical philology for the teaching of Biblical history and literature seven years ago, because I do not remember meeting a comparable idea in the field of classical studies. I know that this idea in the Biblical field to some extent reflects a healthy instinct which will not permit the Bible to become the preserve of specialists, but insists on its remaining (as it is) Everyman's book. Sometimes, however, this idea takes the extreme form of a conviction that the specialized study of Biblical subjects positively disqualifies a man from expressing an acceptable opinion on the Bible. It is possible that this conviction has even been ventilated in our Institute; at any rate, as I read some back numbers, I get the impression at times that some experts in other realms of study who have read papers on Biblical subjects are persuaded that Biblical specialists very often do not really know their own business.

I was interested some time ago, when studying old membership lists, to observe that for a number of years one of the leading Biblical scholars in our English Universities in a former generation was a member of the Institute; I was equally interested to observe that he never read a paper before the Institute. Of course, he may have been invited to read one and declined; I cannot say

At the same time, I should not dream of suggesting that non-specialists should never air their views on Biblical criticism and interpretation in a learned society such as this. The previous Chairman of our Council, the late Air-Commodore P. J. Wiseman, whom we all remember with grateful affection, made some acute contributions to Biblical studies both in the Institute and outside; and his is not the only name we can bring to mind in this regard. Very often the contributions of a non-specialist are peculiarly fresh and stimulating, as he looks at the subject and raises questions from an unusual point of view.

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We are—and properly so—a mixed lot in this Institute, and our approaches to the Bible will vary. The mathematician or natural scientist, for example, contemplating (say) the second and third chapters of Genesis, may be inclined to interpret them with exact literalism and either dismiss them too hastily or expend needless toil in reconciling with his scientific knowledge language which really calls for no such reconciliation. The student of literature, on the other hand, may recognize in these chapters a style of highly symbolic diction such as he is familiar with elsewhere. The philosopher may concentrate on eternal truths which lie discerns beneath the picturesqueness of the narrative. The anthropologist may compare the beliefs reflected there with beliefs held at various times in other parts of the world. The historian may try to determine the chronological setting of the stories and to understand them against their contemporary background. The student of ancient geography may try to fix the location of Eden in terms of the four rivers mentioned in the story. The archaeologist may try to relate the Genesis narrative to parallel narratives extant in early Mesopotamian and other records. The Biblical critic may collate the Massoretic and Samaritan texts with the ancient versions or try to discover the source or sources from which the narrative was derived; he may even try to penetrate beyond the earliest ascertainable written form to an antecedent oral stage. But the theologian, and all Bible readers who bear in mind the prime

purpose for which the Bible was given, will ask what these chapters teach us about God, and about our duty to Him. They will recognize, of course, that these chapters belong to an early stage in God's progressive revelation of Himself, but they will also recognize that these chapters do have the nature of revelation, and only by approaching them thus can we begin to grasp their essential meaning. All the other approaches have their varying values, but their chief value lies in the service which they can render to the theological understanding of these chapters (as of the whole Bible).

"The Scriptures principally teach," said the Westminster divines, "what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man." If we believe that, we shall understand that in the study of these chapters of Genesis it is not nearly so important to argue whether a serpent really spoke or not as it is to consider seriously what the serpent really said. For what the serpent said to Eve is what the same serpent is still saying to us, in an endeavour to distract our minds from God's revelation of Himself and of His will.

The other avenues of approach are by no means unimportant or irrelevant. But they become most important and relevant when they are made to subserve the primary interpretation of the Scriptures as divine revelation. And here surely is the whole *raison d'être* of our Institute. In all our divergent fields of study we have a common interest which brings us together, and that common interest is the Christian faith. The various sciences to which we devote time and strength (Biblical science included)

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will yield their most fruitful results if Theology is accorded her true place as queen of the sciences. Whether she receives her crown rights elsewhere or not, here in the VICTORIA INSTITUTE they can never be disregarded. And Christian theology can be nothing other than *Biblical* theology, if the Bible is rightly recognized as the unique recital of God's saving and self-revealing activity on which our faith rests.

II. BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Sir Frederic Kenyon, in successive Annual Addresses which he delivered as our President, emphasized the special opportunities presented to the Institute to meet the need of the hour, provided that our work was characterized by "liberty of investigation, an open mind, charity towards our opponents, and faith in the victory of truth." One particular way in which he thought the Institute might well provide "the sound basis of scholarship" for carrying on the struggle against anti-Christian forces was in making known the historical foundation of the Christian faith. This is something which I should like to repeat and underline.

For Christianity is nothing if it is not a historical faith—that is to say, a faith founded on things which have really happened. Some Christian leaders have propounded outlines of "basic Christianity" which (they urge) men and women might well accept and live by, even if (*per impossibile*) it could be proved that Jesus of Nazareth had no historic existence. But such a "basic Christianity" is a very different thing from the basic Christianity of the apostles, which consisted in the affirmation that God had acted for the redemption of mankind in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The beliefs and ethical principles of which modern "basic Christianity" consists were certainly inculcated by the apostles, but the apostles inculcated them as corollaries of the redeeming

act of God in Christ. And if we continue to use the term "Christianity" in its historic sense (as we should), then Christianity must rest upon the foundations of the apostolic witness.

At this point it will perhaps be interjected that I am doing the very thing that I deprecated earlier—imposing a restrictive definition on the word "Christian". I hope I am not. The propounders of the "basic Christianity" I have in mind are sincere and highly esteemed Christians; it is not their personal Christianity that is in question, but their wisdom in recommending as essential Christianity something which omits what was fundamental and indispensable to Christianity as first proclaimed.

Julian the Apostate might say of certain pagan mysteries of his day: "These things never happened, and yet they are eternally true." But the glory of the Christian μῦθος, the λόγος of our salvation, is that it

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did happen once for all, as a real historical event, in the Roman province of Judaea, when Pontius Pilate was procurator; and *therefore* it is eternally true.

There has never been a time when the evidence for the truth of Christianity, rightly so called, was more abundant and cogent; what our time demands is that this evidence should be made widely known.

From time to time books appear which profess to tell the story of Christian beginnings as they really happened, with the implication that the account which has come down to us in the New Testament writings is too tendentious, too completely rewritten in accordance with an unhistorical bias, to be accepted as a trustworthy source of information. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the sources of information which the authors of some of these books prefer to the apostolic writings are much later and more precarious than those which they reject—where the authors do not draw on their own imagination. No one will quarrel with a writer for drawing on his own imagination and publishing the product as an avowed work of creative fiction; books like George Moore's *The Brook Kerith* or Robert Graves's *King Jesus* are of this kind, and since they claim to be fictitious reconstructions they must be appraised as such. It is not Works like these, but others which are presented as the products of scholarly and dispassionate research, that I am thinking of. The trained historian will not be led astray by them, nor yet the ordinary Christian who knows whom he has believed, and has some acquaintance with the origin, nature and transmission of the New Testament; but for the sake of others who might be deceived it is desirable that the historical foundations of our faith should be made more widely known than they are.

The New Testament, to be sure is not a disinterested account of Christian origins such as might have been recorded by a reporter from another planet. The men who wrote it were too totally committed to the truth of what they recorded to present it in a spirit of complete detachment. These things were literally matters of life and death to them. The New Testament is, directly or indirectly, the transcript of the personal testimony borne by the apostles to Jesus as Saviour and Lord: "what we have seen and heard we now make known to you." But in bearing this testimony they constantly challenged the severest scrutiny of their claims: this thing was not done in a corner, and the events were sufficiently recent to be investigated impartially. Not that historical research then or now will suffice to make a man a Christian. But many of our contemporaries who would fain be wholehearted

Christians are deterred, I believe, from this total commitment by the idea that the intellectual basis of the Christian faith has somehow or other been undermined. If this stumbling-block could be removed from their minds, and if this Institute could do something towards its removal, that would be an inestimable service to our age.

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III. CHRISTIAN ORIGINS, THE BIBLE, AND GOD

But the Christian story is not detached from its background. A heretic like Marcion might begin his edition of the New Testament with the announcement that "in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, Jesus came down to Capernaum"—down from heaven, full-grown, having no link, biological or historical, with anything that went before. He might insist that the Creator-God of the Old Testament was a completely different being from the superior Redeemer-God of the New Testament. But the gospel which has been delivered to us, in which our salvation lies, tells a different story. It tells how the God who brought the universe into being by His creative will, whose tender mercies are over all His works, who cares for all mankind, who chose His people Israel that they might communicate the knowledge of His truth to the other nations of the earth, and who therefore displayed His mighty acts of mercy and judgment in a special way in Israel's history, is the God who ultimately fulfilled His age-long purpose and promises by sending His Son for our redemption. It tells how the Divine Word became flesh, sharing our nature that as man He might work out man's salvation and make its partakers of His nature. The story is one, and the whole Bible is the book which records it.

But if that is so, what endless scope there is for our investigations in every field of knowledge! For there is nothing in the universe which is irrelevant to the knowledge of God the Creator; nothing pertaining to mankind that is irrelevant to the knowledge of God our Saviour. Moreover, since this God is one God, all truth, however discovered, is His truth, and is therefore ultimately one. Lack of knowledge may make it necessary for us to suspend judgment on many things; but we cannot be true to the purpose of this Institute and hold mutually contradictory beliefs. Whether we study the natural revelation of God in His works of creation and providence, or His redemptive revelation enshrined in the Bible, we need never be afraid of discovering something that will undermine our foundations; we can do nothing against the truth, but only for the truth.

Many things in the Bible which belong rather to the setting of God's revelation than to the essence of the revelation are fascinating subjects of study in themselves; but it is good to keep them in their proper perspective by considering what part they play in relation to God's saving Word to men. It is, for example, interesting to study the census figures in the Book of Numbers, over which there was much serious disputation in the very early days of our Institute. Were there (we may ask) actually six hundred thousand men of military age in the wilderness, or was the real figure more like five thousand, or have the figures of David's census somehow strayed into the wilderness narrative? Whatever the results of a study like this, we shall not nowadays argue the point with a warmth

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that would suggest that the truth of Christianity depends on the answer.

There is never any need to tremble for the Ark of God; it is always good for us to tremble at the Word of God. And we use the Bible aright if we use it in such a way as to hear that Word

speaking to our heart, and assuring us that God has reconciled us to Himself by Jesus Christ. The Spirit of truth, the Lord and Giver of life, who spoke by the prophets, still bears witness to Christ in all the Scriptures and, as I read them, supplies the inward guarantee that here is God Himself speaking to me.

To compare the truth discovered from the study of the Bible with the truth discovered in the pursuit of our other studies is both necessary and profitable, but it can take us only so far and no farther. For the purpose of the Bible is that we may know God, and therefore any light that the Bible may throw on these other subjects of study is incidental and secondary. They show us but the outskirts of His ways; the Biblical revelation lays bare His very heart.

The Bible was not given, for example, that we might know exactly the order of events at the beginning of time or at the end of time, or even the order of events in the intervening course of time. Those parts of the Bible which deal with the First Things and the Last Things are primarily intended to teach us not about these things themselves but about the One who is Himself the First and the Last, the Creator of all in the beginning and the Judge of all at the end. And in so far as the Bible deals with the intervening course of time, its main burden is not the sort of thing for which we have recourse to secular histories, but the message that at the consummation of the ages, the nodal point of time, the real judgment-day of this world, God revealed Himself supremely in Christ. The age-long war between good and evil, as Oscar Cullmann has reminded us, is not of doubtful issue; the decisive battle was fought, the decisive victory won, in the passion and triumph of Christ. The Victory Day celebrations still lie in the future; the important thing is not whether that Victory Day is near or remote, but the fact that its advent is already assured by the finished work of Christ. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered; the slaughtered Lamb is Lord of history.

Our situation to-day is very different from that in which the VICTORIA INSTITUTE came to birth eighty-nine years ago. But as then, so now, there is need for a body of men and women who love the truth and are prepared to follow it wherever it may lead, assured that it can only lead us towards the God of truth. In a day when earth's foundations flee, it is good to follow Herbert Butterfield's counsel: "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted." But those who hold to Him who is truth incarnate and love all truth for His sake, will see light in His light, and by so doing they will not only save themselves, but others also.

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