WILLIAM McKANE *Peter Adamson*

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William McKane
1921–2004

THERE WAS LITTLE IN WILLIE MCKANE'S background and upbringing to herald the distinguished career as Semitist and Old Testament scholar that would follow. Nor was his path into academia one that would be usual in these days, when the track from Bachelors to Masters and a doctorate seems almost to be a *sine qua non*. Rather, the fact that he arrived where he did by the route that he took is itself testimony to the single-minded, even ascetic, dedication to the rigorous pursuit of excellence which was such a hallmark of his scholarship.

Born on 18 February 1921, Willie was brought up with his two sisters in Dundee. His father was a mechanic in the local jute mill of H. & A. Scott and his mother, to whom he was especially close, cared for the children of some of the other mothers who worked at the mill. Although he obviously did well during his years at Stobswell School, where he was *dux*, it was therefore probably more by assumption than forethought that he left at 15 in order to become a clerk in the same firm, apparently intending to pursue a business career.

There was another influence besides his family which began to make itself felt at this time, however, namely that of the church which his family attended. It was a congregation of the Original Secession Church, a fiercely independent-minded denomination whose origins reached back to a split in the Church of Scotland in 1733 over the issue of patronage—whether or not the congregation retained the right to choose its own minister by accepting or rejecting a candidate proposed by the church's patron. The path to ordination was long, and in Willie's case prolonged by the intervention of the Second World War. Whether or not it was the case from the outset, certainly by the time of ordination itself a

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significant motivating factor in proceeding was the desire to work more effectively for the reunion of the denomination with the Church of Scotland. When this was successfully concluded in 1956, Willie was among the first to accede to the Church of Scotland (though to no one's surprise there were individual congregations, including the one of which Willie had himself been the minister, which remained apart).

Ordination required first a university degree, and for an arts subject, at least, that meant Latin. At an early stage, however, his studies at night school were interrupted by the war, and Willie saw service in the RAF from 1941–5. Of what that involved in detail little enough is known, but it is a firm part of family tradition and pride that he succeeded in passing the final hurdle for university entrance, including Higher Greek, in a special examination held at an RAF station in Holland in 1945; evidently, he had sufficient time and strength of resolve to continue his studies even while on active service.

Thus it was that as what would nowadays be called a mature student Willie embarked upon an honours degree at St Andrews in English and Philosophy in January 1946. Although he did not ultimately pursue either subject professionally, it is not difficult to detect their impact on some of his later writing, both in his choice of the so-called Wisdom literature of the Old Testament as a major field of research and perhaps even more, as we shall see later in connection with his last published book, in his handling of some of the wider theological issues arising from a scholarly approach to the biblical text.

Two other undergraduate activities were perhaps more indicative of things to come. On the one hand, he attended Hebrew classes with Professor A. M. Honeyman, presumably purely out of interest in the first instance, and this, of course, was to set him on his life's career. Only marginally less important, one is tempted to suggest, he collected a blue in association football. His interest in several different sports remained with him till the end. To regular participation in football on Saturdays during his years in Glasgow should be added his abiding love of cricket, which he continued playing as a member of the St Andrews University Staff team until well into his sixties. He was also a keen follower of rugby, supporting the University XV and not infrequently travelling to Edinburgh for the internationals at Murrayfield, and a member of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St Andrews. The editors of his festschrift saw fit in the course of a very brief introductory appreciation to make mention of the fact that 'Monday morning coffee in St. Mary's usually centres on a

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discussion of the weekend's soccer or rugby or, depending on the season, cricket'.[1]

During the three long vacations of his undergraduate years he attended summer schools at the Bible Training Institute in Glasgow[2] in order specifically to prepare for ordination under the guidance of Principal Francis Davidson. Thus as early as 1949 he was ordained to serve in the church at Kilwinning. He was conscientious as a minister, preaching twice on Sundays and again once on Wednesdays as well as editing the denomination's magazine. But according to one member of the congregation, he was not really cut out for the pastoral ministry because he was not sufficiently social—and she should know, for this was none other than Agnes, who was nursing in Glasgow at the time. They were to be married in 1952 and it is difficult to imagine how he could have succeeded without her devoted and steadfast support over some fifty-two years. But that is to anticipate.

In addition to fulfilling his church duties, Willie travelled daily during those years into the centre of Glasgow in order to study Semitic languages (principally Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic), eventually graduating with first-class honours. This led to the offer of an assistant lecturership in 1953, and from that point he never looked back. The first three years were marked by the uncertainty which attends all untenured junior positions, but he worked for his Ph.D. at the same time and promotion to a full lecturership (and later senior lecturership) duly followed.

As Willie's doctoral thesis was never published, he was already 35 before his first article appeared and over 40 before his first book was published. Both were in the field of Arabic studies, expertise in which is noteworthy in much of his later work on the cognate language of Hebrew but which he did not pursue in research terms after these opening forays (indeed, it is of interest to note that his election to a Fellowship of the British Academy later on was by the Oriental and African Studies Section, not Theology, as might have been supposed). The book is a translation with a brief introduction and minimal annotations of one of the four volumes of al-Ghazali's major work, *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*c.* AD 1096).[3] His Preface gives no indication as to why he should

[1] J. D. Martin and P. R. Davies (eds.), *A Word in Season: Essays in Honour of William McKane* (Sheffield, 1986), p. vii.

[2] The Institute was later transformed into the Glasgow Bible College, and in 1998 it merged with the Northumbria Bible College to become the International Christian College of today.

[3] W. McKane, *Al-Ghazali's Book of Fear and Hope* (Leiden, 1962). The text itself is not reproduced and the work is based on a modern edition (1939) rather than on manuscript sources.

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have undertaken this particular task other than acknowledging that it was suggested to him by his former teacher, the Revd E. F. F. Bishop—so perhaps there was an element of understandable concern to keep in favour with a senior colleague. He claims this to be a pioneer translation into English and accepts that there are passages where he does not think that he has penetrated through to the full meaning of the Arabic: 'It will be a task for future translators to clear up these obscurities.' A recent informed opinion is that 'it looks competent, on the whole. A bit short on annotation . . . a reference to the relevant Qur'anic passages would have been helpful . . . some strange transliteration mistakes of very common words', and so on.[4] At all events, this was not a direction that Willie pursued in any further publications, which thereafter were firmly in the areas of Hebrew and Old Testament studies.

From the Glasgow years came a number of articles and three further books. Several of the articles were published in the *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society*. Willie himself edited the journal for a number of years (1965–72), and its demise some years later has been frequently lamented. Not a few scholars who were subsequently to make a mark in the field published there early if not, indeed, first.

Unlike all his later publications, the next two books to appear were at the more accessible end of the market, intended especially for students and ministers, but also for others interested in the Bible from a lay perspective. *I and II Samuel* (London, 1963) has long been noted for the fact that it is nevertheless based upon deeper scholarship than some others in the series to which it belongs (Torch Bible Commentaries), and this is no doubt in part because it will have drawn on insights gained while writing his unpublished Ph.D. on 'The Old Israelite Community and the Rise of the Monarchy'. The other book in this category will have served its purpose at the time, but today it is hardly remembered at all.[5]

[4] Private communication from Professor Geert Jan van Gelder, FBA, of St John's College, Oxford. He adds, 'I came across one funny translation error: "youths passed by in skiffs, beating with the oars and drinking" (24); this sounds like punting English undergraduates. It should be "youths passed by in a boat [singular], playing the tambourine and drinking".' It is unlikely that at this stage of his career Willie would have had much experience of punting, however!

[5] W. McKane, *Tracts for the Times: Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Song of Songs* (Bible Guides 12; London, 1965). The series was edited by W. Barclay (a Glasgow colleague) and F. F. Bruce, and was intended to introduce biblical literature to a lay readership. Characteristically, Willie was concerned to allow these ancient texts to speak in their own voice, not constrained by ulterior agendas: 'they will not speak to us if we submit them to constraint or torture [*sic*], but, if we allow to each the truth of its own nature, they will speak to our times with fluency and weight'.

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Quite different, however, were both the content and the reception of the final book from the Glasgow years, *Prophets and Wise Men*, a little book of which Willie is said always to have been particularly fond. In it he advanced an analysis of the two great institutions of the title in Ancient Israel which was not wholly new but which had not previously, perhaps, been seen in such starkly differentiated colours. On the one hand, careful exegesis of selected passages leads to the conclusion that what he calls old wisdom was 'a disciplined empiricism engaged with the problems of government and administration' (p. 53). These politicians were not necessarily godless, but professionally they had to engage in hard-headed decision-making based on accumulated experience and practical politics. On the other hand, the prophets (and it is principally with Isaiah and Jeremiah that he is concerned) stood in the tradition of those who viewed the whole of history on the international as well as the local level as being under God's control and they knew his will in current circumstances through their access to his Word. In normal circumstances, these two could co-exist because they were applied to separate spheres of national life. But with the rise of the Assyrian empire with its impact on the Levantine states, there arose situations of crisis where both addressed the same situation—a clash of *Realpolitik* and *Heilsgeschichte* which was simply irreconcilable. Writing in the 1960s, Willie was able to hint in his conclusion that such conflicts of authority were still very much in evidence.

In retrospect, it is helpful to appreciate something of the prevailing movements, both in narrowly Old Testament and in wider theological discussions, in order to understand why this slim volume had the impact it did, given that, albeit in modified form, there are some aspects of its thesis that seem rather commonplace today. Within the circles of Old Testament scholarship, this period was the heyday of the so-called Biblical Theology movement, in which a significant stress was placed upon the interpretation of the past in terms of God's mighty acts. A consequence of this was that little place was found for the Wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, for instance), though in compensation a major drive was initiated to seek to find wisdom influence on other parts of the canon. Though not framed as such, Willie's book must be seen as in part a reaction against this one-sided view, and while in his Preface he rightly states that he has no intention of taking sides with either statesman or prophet, since partisanship 'will not do justice to this conflict nor show its contemporary relevance', nevertheless anyone who knew Willie's own personality is unlikely to overlook the fact that he would have felt

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that the importance and value of rational decision making should not be underestimated, as it was tending to be in contemporary debate. More widely, these were also the years when the theology of Karl Barth, with its emphasis on the Word, was dominant, not least in Scotland, and of course this was entirely congenial to the work of the biblical theologians, as exemplified especially in the writings of the great German Old Testament theologian, Gerhard von Rad, with whom the book interacts closely. I should stress that neither Barth nor the Biblical Theology movement as such are named in the book, so that it is speculative to assert that Willie had either explicitly in his sights as he wrote. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to read his work historically against that background and to see how in a modest fashion it contributed to the crisis which beset the movement not so many years after.

By the time the book was published, Willie and Agnes already had four children, and a fifth was to follow soon. A dilemma now faced him in terms of his career: should he wait for a vacancy to occur in the Glasgow chair, and so hope to continue to work and raise his family in familiar and congenial surroundings, or should he respond to the advertisement for the chair of Hebrew and Oriental Languages back at his Alma Mater of St Andrews? His choice of the latter course is not one that he subsequently regretted. Although for the first year of his tenure he had to travel to St Andrews for two days a week, the family was able to move to join him in the summer of 1968, buying a pleasant house in an area which the University itself developed for staff housing. Friends have written appreciatively about the generous hospitality of the McKane home both in Glasgow and then in St Andrews.

In the department he found Peter Coxon already in post. He soon brought over Jim Martin, a former colleague, from Glasgow, and within three years they were joined by a former pupil, Robin Salters. These four remained together in harmonious relationship for some twenty years, a remarkable, and one ventures to say unique, example of academic collegiality which reflects well on them all, but not least on Willie, who was the acknowledged academic leader. It will have helped too that Jim was happy to undertake the lion's share of routine administration. Though he took his expected turn as Dean of the Faculty of Divinity in 1973–7, Willie was mostly content to be left alone with his books, and no doubt this was one of the reasons why he resented government interference in universities. He was a conscientious teacher (mostly at the undergraduate level, with only a few graduate students over the years), and it must have pained him to see how a department of Hebrew and Old Testament was

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changed to Hebrew and Biblical Studies and then ultimately to Divinity. He made no secret of the fact that in his opinion this was symptomatic of what he regarded as a decline in standards, and it goes along with this that he fought hard at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for the retention of Hebrew as a compulsory element in ministerial training. His comments in private on Old Testament scholars who did not get fully to grips with the problems of the Hebrew text at first hand were outspokenly trenchant.

Life in St Andrews seems quickly to have settled into a comfortable routine, which suited Willie's unpretentious style. The University was within twenty minutes walk from home, and he would go in on such days as he was teaching, generally taking morning coffee with students as well as colleagues. But it was at home that he wrote, and so he would return there as soon as possible. As we shall see, these were immensely productive years, and it was to this side of his duties that he gave his main attention. He seldom spent any prolonged periods away from home. The one major exception was a year spent as Andrew Mellon Senior Fellow of the National Humanities Center, North Carolina (1987–8), where he was engaged on the second volume of his Jeremiah commentary. Even there, however, Agnes recalls how he quickly reduced life to a routine that suited research, taking the minibus to the NHC in Research Triangle Park each day between the hours of eight and five. He speaks warmly in the Preface to his volume of the generous hospitality of the Center and of the intellectual stimulus from contacts with its fellows. Among them were Professors S. Talmon of the Hebrew University and John Van Seters of Chapel Hill. It is likely that Willie will have appreciated this sustained contact with a small group of colleagues; he was never comfortable in large social gatherings but he was excellent company in small groups of like-minded people. And this was evidently appreciated in Chapel Hill, for Van Seters has recently dedicated a book to his memory,[6] writing positively of Willie's scholarship and also mentioning how they became 'good friends' during that year.

Apart from that year, there was a spell of three months spent in the Lebanon under Foreign Office auspices (1959) and a separate trip to Israel (April/May 1975). Otherwise, he preferred to remain reclusively at home.

[6] John Van Seters, *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the "Editor" in Biblical Criticism* (Winona Lake, 2006).

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Willie was not overmuch interested in reactions to his writings, nor did he actively court the various honours which came his way. Accordingly, he kept no correspondence which might be revealing of his thinking, and for most matters we have to rely on the memories of others and deductions from his publications. There is one exception, however, the very isolated nature of which underlines how strongly he felt on the subject. St Mary's College was founded in 1539 on the Continental trilingual model with an emphasis on the knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Within forty years, following the Reformation, it was reconstituted as the Theological Faculty of the University and this in particular, it must be remembered, within a system where a University education in Theology may itself serve as a preparation for ordination. The College is still housed in part in its original buildings, and it has a distinguished and justifiably proud history. When Willie arrived at St Andrews the Principal was Professor Matthew Black, who held the post, as was customary, until his retirement. Whether the two following facts are related is not clear, but after Black's retirement in 1978 the University authorities decreed that the role of Principal should become a four-year, fixed-term appointment, and Willie was evidently disappointed, not to say hurt, to be passed over in favour of Jim White. Willie then succeeded him (1982–6). Willie wrote to Professor George Anderson of Edinburgh relating this saga and giving his side of the story, uncharacteristically giving Agnes a copy of his letter for safe-keeping. It is clear that he thought that the affair had not been handled with the sense of integrity which was the hallmark of his own dealings, and it seems to have been the one really painful episode during his otherwise happy tenure.

Six major works, one in two volumes, mark the St Andrews years, and retirement in 1990 was if anything merely a spur to greater productivity. The first, much of the work on which must have already been completed in Glasgow, was his massive commentary on the book of Proverbs.[7] It is not difficult to see how naturally one of its major theses develops an aspect of *Prophets and Wise Men*, already discussed, but it goes further than just this. Indeed, a case can be made for the judgement that those aspects which seem most indebted to the former work have been largely discarded in more recent work whereas the other, and really new, departure has been generally adopted.

So far as the commentary proper is concerned—roughly two-thirds of the whole—it is typical of the style of commentary work that was to fol-

[7] W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Old Testament Library; London, 1970).

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low in subsequent years: careful attention on a verse-by-verse basis to the problems of the Hebrew text, on which light may be shed either by the translations in the ancient versions (Greek, Latin, Aramaic and Syriac) or by consideration of the meaning of the word in cognate Semitic languages (Arabic, Aramaic, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and so on). At the time Willie was writing, this latter method was extremely popular in some circles as an approach to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, and it may be said to have reached its height (if that is the right term) in the translation of the Old Testament in the *New English Bible*, which coincidentally appeared the same year (1970).[8] While open to the method in principle, Willie shows himself more cautious in its application than some, and it is interesting to note that later on he was to be a member of the group which worked on the preparation of the *Revised English Bible* (1989), a major purpose of which was to purge the *NEB* of some of its more speculative translations based upon this principle. When this sober text-critical work is allied to Willie's thoughtful observations on many of the proverbs themselves, it makes the commentary a standard resource for the study of this book.

The long introduction is largely given over to an important survey of comparable Wisdom literature elsewhere in the ancient Near East in order to establish that two separate types of composition have been combined in the biblical book, so-called sentence literature on the one hand (i.e. something closer to our modern use of the term proverb) and instruction literature on the other (i.e. more extended discourses, of which there are a number in Proverbs 1–9 in particular). According to an important view which dominated in the middle of the twentieth century, there was to be traced an evolutionary development from the former to the latter, and a consequence of this was that the opening chapters of the book were to be dated last, and certainly not before the so-called post-exilic period. Willie was not alone in protesting against this consensus, though he was certainly among the most influential. By the simple expedient of working through many examples of instruction texts, especially though not exclusively from Egypt—that is to say, extended compositions of wisdom material that was often used for the training of the royal and scribal classes—he was able to show that this was quite simply a different genre

[8] For an account of this method and discussion of some methodological issues which were all too frequently ignored by its more enthusiastic practitioners, see James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968). It should nevertheless be emphasised, in view of the way some later writers have referred to this book, that Barr does not regard the method as inherently invalid.

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of writing from the sentence literature and that historically it was quite as old (in Egypt both genres existed for well over a thousand years before any possible date for Proverbs). No evolutionary development of this sort should therefore be traced in Proverbs, and the whole issue of dating the relevant material needed to be tackled from a different angle. This was one of Willie's all-too-rare forays into the biblical analytical method known as form criticism, and it was brilliantly successful.

The same cannot be said of the other major thesis which he sought to defend in the commentary. He arranges the sentence literature into three groups, in the first of which the 'sentences are set in the framework of old wisdom' while in the third the sentences 'are identified by the presence of God-language or by other items of vocabulary expressive of a moralism which derives from Yahwistic piety' (p. 11). Very much in line with the argument of *Prophets and Wise Men*, this third group represents a reinterpretation of the first and is therefore to be dated later. The theory presupposes that old wisdom operated without any religious underpinning and that the later collectors of the proverbs acted somewhat automatically, bringing together every saying that they had received without consideration for its present context. The theory is clearly open to the charge of circular reasoning, and it has been criticised on other more technical grounds as well.[9] Unlike the work elsewhere in the commentary, this particular theory has not withstood the test of time.

The next book to appear is very different in character and in substance from anything else that Willie wrote, and it may be that for that reason he appears to have had some difficulty in getting it published: in the Preface he is unusually effusive in his expression of thanks to Professor Black 'for his energetic efforts to have the book published . . . I cannot adequately express my thanks to him for his concern, persistence and expertise which have brought the book to the point of publication'.[10] Moreover he refers to a book published two years before his own as having appeared after he had completed it.

It is not that the book is not learned or based upon sound scholarship. Rather, the subject matter is likely to have been such as to cause publishers to wonder about an adequate market. Although entitled *Studies in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Edinburgh, 1979), which sounds attractive enough, it is really a reaction to what is perceived as being a mistaken

[9] For a particularly incisive critique, see Stuart Weeks, *Early Israelite Wisdom* (Oxford, 1994), ch. 4.

[10] We may note that Willie wrote the obituary notice of Matthew Black in the 1995 *Proceedings*. It is warmly appreciative, but offers honest criticism in places where that is called for.

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trend in (then) recent study of the Genesis narratives to use archaeology in an attempt to salvage historicity, a quest not only dubious in itself but distracting from other and, in Willie's opinion, more important aspects of these narratives. From the point of view of method, questions of literary genre should be settled before historicity can be addressed, and with this in mind he tracks back to an earlier phase of scholarship and seeks to recover its importance with chapters on genre, tribal history, tradition-history and so on. Unfortunately, its publication coincided with two important monographs which negatively went a long way to destroying the archaeological approach from within, with an expertise in that field that Willie would never have claimed to have, and secondly with an alternative movement towards literary readings of these same texts which captured the imagination in a way that left Willie's work floundering high and very dry. His work retains its value in terms of the history of scholarship in the earlier part of the twentieth century, but as a programme on which to move forward it sank almost without trace. It is perhaps significant that at the point where he left off detailed textual and exegetical work he seems to have lost his voice. Fortunately, he was to find it again in his next major publication, the first volume of his *magnum opus* on the book of Jeremiah.

The 'International Critical Commentary' (ICC), for which Willie was invited to write on Jeremiah, has long had a special place in English-language biblical scholarship. The original series started to appear in the late nineteenth century, and although most of the volumes appeared before the First World War, one or two appeared later, the latest being in fact in 1951. Some books were never completed, however, and by the 1970s some of the older volumes were in urgent need of replacement. New editors therefore began to commission some new volumes, and Willie's on Jeremiah was the first Old Testament volume of the new series to appear (1986 and 1996). While the series aims at comprehensive coverage of critical issues concerned with the Old Testament, one of its particular strengths (and in the nature of the case one that is only occasionally paralleled in other series) is its detailed attention to the problems specifically of the Hebrew text—text-critical and philological in particular. Not surprisingly in the light of what we have already seen, the choice of Willie proved to be an inspired one.

The book of Jeremiah raises several major problems which are peculiar to itself. At the textual level, it is striking that the Greek translation, the Septuagint, is some 20 per cent shorter than the Hebrew on which it is supposedly based (mostly by numerous small minuses rather than the

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omission of large blocks of material) and, what is more, at one point it presents the chapters in a radically different order. One uncertainty about this situation was clarified by some small fragments among the Dead Sea Scrolls which include a Hebrew text comparable with the Greek; it is therefore certain that the Greek is based on a Hebrew *Vorlage* and is not the result of the translator's work. There must therefore have been two versions of the Hebrew text of Jeremiah in circulation in antiquity, but why? And which was earlier?

Secondly, there are three types of writing in the book, the origins of the third of which, at least, is uncertain. First, there are poetic oracles, as in many other prophetic books; in the opinion of most moderate scholars, most of this material probably derives from Jeremiah himself. Then secondly there is prose biographical material about Jeremiah. Traditionally, this has been ascribed to the prophet's secretary, Baruch. Even if this seems unduly optimistic, the probability that these stories were written and ordered in order to present a theological message of their own by some who stood in the Jeremiah tradition is widely believed. Thirdly, however, there are speeches or sermons purportedly by Jeremiah, but in prose, and prose which closely resembles Deuteronomy at that. On the origins of this third class of material opinions are sharply divided.

Willie's commentary makes a distinguished and influential contribution to the study of these and related issues. That is not to say that the work is above all criticism, and fairness dictates that these should be mentioned first in order to clear the ground. It is a weakness that he chooses to interact with a very limited range of secondary literature; he tends to interact with only the major commentators and a limited range of other studies. This may be defended in terms of space saved (the two volumes are already about 1,500 pages long), but it reduces the work's value for certain purposes. Secondly, and more seriously, it does not deal in much detail with some important critical methods, such as form criticism. Whether he felt out of sympathy with some of the modern trends in exegetical research or simply wanted to concentrate on his strengths is not clear, but certainly one learns quickly that there are topics on which it is not worth bothering to consult him. Finally, the book is not presented in the most helpful manner. Whereas most volumes in the series distinguished clearly between text-critical and linguistic discussion, general exegesis and wider considerations on each section as a whole, Willie tends just to plough through on a more or less verse-by-verse basis (though without actually highlighting which verse is being dealt with at any given point), with discussion of whatever he considered important all jumbled

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together. It is true that he justifies his approach with the observation that the versions are not only of text-critical importance, but are also the fountainhead for all subsequent exegesis (p. xv), but however accurate that may be, the result is a book which is quite hard to consult (not helped by its demanding English style) when wanting an answer to a specific question of a verse, as is often the case with commentaries.

That said, however, there are areas of commentary work where Willie is without peer, and he handles many issues in detail and with reference to sources that very few others are competent to tackle. In addition, he has made an influential contribution to some of the major issues which the book raises.

First, his attention to the ancient versions of the Old Testament as well as to the work of the great medieval Jewish commentators (who wrote in both Hebrew and Arabic) is detailed and judicious.[11] These sources are important both as textual witnesses and as giving an indication of the possibilities for the interpretation of obscurities from antiquity on. Not surprisingly, many of these alternatives remain live options to this day, as may be seen by a comparison of the different English translations. The book of Jeremiah had not been treated with this kind of analysis for a long time, if ever, and it is work which will endure for several generations.

Secondly, his conclusions about the manner of composition of the book are turned in a novel way to explain his understanding of both the major critical issues which were introduced earlier. The name of McKane will be for ever associated with the expression 'rolling corpus', by which he meant that the book was never subjected to the kind of tidy editing (redaction) which many scholars now seek to find, but rather that it grew in a somewhat random manner as several generations of scribes added to it in different ways. At the micro-level, this is evident from many of the small pluses in the longer Hebrew as against the shorter Greek text, where titles are added to named individuals and so on. This is not evidence (as some have supposed) for a systematic work of expansion according to a major conceptual programme, such as might characterise a complete redaction of the work; the whole process was far more haphazard in Willie's opinion.

[11] According to Professor J. A. Emerton, FBA, who was the Old Testament editor of the series, in his own preparatory study of any given passage, Willie would in fact consult the medieval commentators first, even though in his written presentation he usually presents the material roughly in chronological order.

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But the same observation may be taken to the higher level of some of the prose additions to the underlying poetry of the book, so that here the 'rolling corpus' idea is supplemented with the saying that some of the poetry has 'triggered' the prose. This proposal (which comes close to the more recent fashionable development of the notion of *Fortschreibung*) is thus able to explain how it comes about that some of the prose includes phrases or other features which are thought to be characteristic of the poetry (and which have therefore been used by more conservative scholars to argue that Jeremiah could himself have been the author of the prose). On the other hand, it excludes the more comprehensive theories of Deuteronomic redaction—the theory that the whole book had been systematically worked over by a single editor who was much influenced by both the linguistic style and the ideological notions which are characteristic of the book of Deuteronomy. Willie seems at this point to have had an almost pathological aversion to any theory which tried to reduce what he saw as the untidy nature of the book to any kind of externally imposed order. It is in the nature of scholarship that people will keep trying to find some single key that will unlock this most confusing of books. Willie was content rather to allow the confusion to speak for itself; all subsequent writers have had to come to terms with his presentation of the evidence, and it is not clear at the present time that any have succeeded in getting any further.

In what they choose to present, these two volumes are a remarkable achievement of sustained erudition, and they are unlikely to be surpassed, or even equalled, for many decades. But with his characteristic modesty Willie was not willing to rest on his laurels. Indeed, one very different book appeared between the two volumes of the commentary. Though it is based on earlier lectures, it almost looks as though he sought recreation from the main task of the mid-seventies to the mid-nineties by turning aside to a somewhat different field of research, albeit one that informed much of his other writing.

Selected Christian Hebraists (Cambridge, 1989) 'arose', Willie tells us, 'out of public lectures which were offered in St Mary's College, St Andrews, as "The St Mary's College Lectures" in the Candlemas Term during the years 1982–5'.[12] These were the years, it will be recalled, when

[12] His general interest in the history of Christian Hebraists surfaces elsewhere too, not only in the book cited in the following footnote, but also in such articles as 'Benjamin Kennicott: an Eighteenth Century Researcher', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 28 (1977), 445–64, and 'Calvin as an Old Testament Commentator', *Nederduits Gereformeerd Teologese Tydskrift*, 25 (1984), 250–9.

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Willie was Principal of the college, and he is quite self-conscious in having chosen his topic 'as one which should give scope for the exercise of trilingual scholarship'. He links this concern with a few words about the origins and subsequent history of the college, and given his strength of feeling over the way in which he was initially passed over for the role of Principal once the new arrangements for tenure came into force, it is hard to resist the temptation to see here (whether consciously or unconsciously) a playing out of some of his earlier hurt and frustration. Several of the Christian Hebraists whose work he analyses were themselves either rejected or at the least marginalised in their day because their scholarship put them at odds with one or another aspect of Church authority. This in itself was not, of course, a problem that befell Willie, but there are indications elsewhere in his writing that in many respects he felt that his approach to scholarship by way of the old-fashioned virtues of textual and philological analysis as well as his intensely humane rationalism meant 'that I have tended to resist the fashions of Old Testament scholarship and that I have usually been swimming against the current'.[13] It is likely that he felt a strong affinity in purpose, if not in circumstance or opinion, with the likes of Origen, Richard Simon and Alexander Geddes among those to whom he devotes a chapter. A remark in the introductory chapter is surely autobiographical as well as historical:[14] 'The critical study of the Hebrew Bible does not co-exist easily with powerful theological preoccupations, and it lies in the nature of their scholarly interests and the mental habits which these encourage that Hebraists do not usually set themselves up as great theological innovators' (p. 10). Willie was to return to some of these concerns in his next book.

Before turning to that, however, we should take note of the remarkable fact that, whereas most people would have had enough of such work after the completion of a task the size of his Jeremiah commentary, Willie seems just to have carried on in similar vein with the preparation of a commentary on the very much shorter book of Micah.[15] This was the last of his books to appear, though at the time of his death he had made some considerable progress with a commentary on the book of Job. Although this latter was not yet in a fit state for publication, it is planned that its substance should be put at the disposal of the future ICC commentator on Job so that its insights will not be entirely lost.

[13] W. McKane, *A Late Harvest: Reflections on the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. vii.
[14] Reassuringly, Willie's daughter Ursula quite independently hit upon this same sentence as one where 'he could have been talking of himself'.
[15] W. McKane, *The Book of Micah: Introduction and Commentary* (Edinburgh, 1998).

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Neither of these commentaries was specifically commissioned; it seems Willie chose to work on them out of his own interest. In the case of Job, this is readily intelligible. Its formidable philological obscurities would have drawn him like a magnet. The case of Micah is not so clear, and he gives us no hint as to why he chose it. Perhaps after Jeremiah he just wanted something shorter! At any rate there are parts of the Hebrew text of this book which are notoriously difficult, if not corrupt. Willie's commentary follows exactly the same style and approach as that on Jeremiah, with all its strengths and drawbacks, and once again it will serve future generations at the level of the study of the text and versions while perhaps leaving problems at the level of composition and history to be taken up afresh in the light of the firmer foundations which he has laid.[16]

In 1995 there appeared what is in some respects the most personal of Willie's many publications; indeed, he introduces it as 'a concatenated description of my own Odyssey' (p. vii). *A Late Harvest: Reflections on the Old Testament* is said to be the fruit of the Honours Seminar on Old Testament Theology which he conducted at St Mary's throughout his tenure there, though quite in what way is not clear.

The main concern of the book seems to be an exploration of the nature of prophecy and how, if at all, it relates to revelation. As we have seen to be his practice sometimes elsewhere, he does not approach this topic head on but rather by way of a (selective) history of scholarship on the subject from the time of Maimonides on. Maimonides was a twelfth-century Jewish philosopher, aspects of whose great work *The Guide of the Perplexed* were clearly congenial to Willie's own position; indeed, it will be recalled that part of his first degree was in philosophy. However, in order to reach that, we are taken carefully through the relevant works of some of the greats of Old Testament scholarship not only from the Reformation period (Zwingli, Calvin, and so on) but also from the nineteenth century (A. Kuenen, J. Wellhausen and William Robertson Smith) and on down to the present with particular attention to such diverse scholars as J. Pedersen, I. Engnell, J. Lindblom, A. Farrer, L. Alonso Schökel and G. von Rad.

[16] Willie himself would not have talked so much of foundations as of the 'basement where linguists do their work' in contrast with the 'penthouse of hermeneutics' (*A Late Harvest*, p. 163). Ursula comments that 'basement dwellers are not well known to the public and so they never really go in or out of fashion. Penthouse dwellers are fashionable for a season until the next trend arrives.'

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For the most part, Willie does not spell out his reaction to each scholar, but leaves us to infer his agreement or disapproval. Sometimes this is not altogether apparent, though at other times it is not difficult. For instance, when he says of Farrer that his understanding of prophetic inspiration 'diminishes their humanity to vanishing point and makes them into puppets controlled by God' (p. 119), we may legitimately infer that he does not approve. Indeed, in the Preface he speaks of the 'spookiness of Farrar's portrayal',[17] just as he also states forthrightly that he 'could not stomach von Rad's contention that New Testament meanings should be found in Old Testament texts by an exegesis done in the freedom of the Holy Spirit' (though whether this is an entirely fair characterisation of von Rad's position as a whole is another question). At any rate, guided by such clear statements we may reconstruct Willie's approach to the issue of prophetic inspiration somewhat as follows.

As he states several times both in this book and elsewhere, he is convinced that 'God does not speak Hebrew'. By this he means that such expressions as 'the word of God' and that 'God speaks' should not be over-interpreted, as he finds they often are, as though the prophets 'supplied their vocal chords to enable the Almighty to speak'. The prophets were fully human at all times, and they spoke in a language which is accessible to other humans by way of the normal study of grammar and lexicography. They were not Jekyll and Hyde characters—inspired one minute and 'normal' the next—and any suggestion to the contrary is open to the charge of docetism. The 'humanity of the canonical prophets should be preserved and . . . any diminishment of that humanity, associated with a dichotomy of man and prophet, or a normal state of consciousness and a "revelatory state" should be avoided' (p. 144). Indeed, in an uncharacteristically personal moment, he concludes that:

> If they entertained such magical views about the words which they spoke and the symbolic acts which they performed as is alleged, they have been significantly disengaged from the pattern of humane thinking which some of us supposed that we shared with them, and resort to them, for a contribution to theistic truth and ethical elevation has been, more or less, put out of court. (p. 127)

Note that there is no problem here with referring to 'theistic truth'; this is not a totally secular rationalism which is being advocated, but rather an

[17] It may be noted that here as consistently elsewhere Willie misspelt Farrer's name. This is so uncharacteristic that one is tempted to speculate that it is unconsciously related somehow to his obvious aversion to Farrer's work.

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urgent plea that 'a literary description should not be transposed into a doctrine of revelation and be thought to supply transparent theological conclusions. This is a disastrous confusion of categories' (p. 103). He does not deny that the prophets may have had visionary or other similar experiences,[18] nor that they had a conviction that they were speaking the truth about and from God. What matters is the affirmation that they remained fully human all of the time, and so do their words.

The consequence of this line of reasoning is that biblical, and in particular prophetic, literature should be studied like any other, and as we have seen repeatedly, this is just what Willie did throughout his career. He may have felt that some modern trends as well as some forms of more theological exegesis were casting him into the mould of an old-fashioned positivist for whom traditional historical-critical research was the only worthwhile approach, but if so he was more than prepared to take the brickbats if that was the cost of his intellectual integrity. Anything more would have to be cast into the realm of spooks.

The appeal to the dangers of docetism indicates that he is casting his understanding of scripture as being in some way analogous with an orthodox christological doctrine—the affirmation of the full humanity as well as the full divinity of Christ. His insistence on the humanity of scripture, with all the consequences that flow from it in terms of appropriate scholarly methods, is well made and urged with a degree of passion on occasions which might seem surprising. Of the other side of the coin, however, little is said either in this book or elsewhere. There are those who would criticise him for this, but it should be appreciated that he was not attempting to formulate a doctrine of scripture in the manner of a systematic theologian. His purpose was to discuss the issue in a way that should lead to the framing of an appropriate academic method for study and research. For this, the human side of the text was all important, and he would have had no truck with those who in very recent years have tried to suggest that because scripture was written from within a standpoint of faith it can therefore only be expounded from within that selfsame standpoint. His rigour and discipline in writing were such that he rarely indicated what other considerations influenced his personal understanding of scripture. He is prepared to talk sometimes of the mystery of divine encounter, but he would not have considered it the role of an academic

[18] See, for instance, p. 145, 'I shall assume, without argument, that there is a transcendental dimension, an encounter of the prophet with God, though I am aware of the logical disadvantage of producing such an ultimate—an unanalysable—mystery out of the hat.'

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exegete to tease out the implications of what that involved.[19] Humanity and rationalism should accept their limitations and be content.

As I have mentioned, retirement in 1990 meant no slackening of effort. He was regularly in his study until the day before his death on 4 September 2004, when for the first time in his life he had to be taken into hospital. Agnes, on whom he relied for so much (not least guidance when going to meetings outside of his normal circuit, for he had a terrible sense of direction), expressed relief that the end was swift and that he was able to continue working more or less to the last. 'He would have made a terrible patient.' None who knew him would disagree.

Willie received a number of honours during the course of his career, including a Glasgow D.Litt. (1980), an honorary DD from Edinburgh (1984), Fellowship of the British Academy (1980) and the award of its Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies (1985), a Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (1984), a Fellowship of the National Humanities Center, North Carolina (1987–8) and a Corresponding Membership of the Göttingen Akademie der Wissenschaften (1997). He was elected President of the (British) Society for Old Testament Study in 1978, acted as Chairman of the Peshitta Committee of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament from 1980 onwards and served on the advisory board of *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*.

But though these honours brought him satisfaction, they were as nothing compared to the pleasure he derived from music, literature and sport and above all the pride that he took in his large and expanding family. His daughter Ursula has written perceptively of his 'sense of belonging to a cultural tradition. His rootedness in his heritage was not uncritical, but it gave his life shape. He never missed a Sunday service of worship.' Indeed, throughout his tenure at St Andrews he would faithfully (if not always too comfortably) attend the University chapel, though it was only occasionally that he preached. As soon as he retired, however, he and Agnes moved their allegiance to Cameron Church in the small village on their side of St Andrews. There he found greater contentment, and it is fitting that he should have been buried there. The simple headstone has at its foot a reference to Micah 6:8, a verse which Ursula also

[19] As already mentioned, we have to be content with hints dropped almost in passing. To add to the words cited in the previous footnote, for instance, Ursula draws attention to a quotation from p. 132 in which Willie more or less repeats what he had previously written on p. 459 of his Jeremiah commentary: 'It is the quality and profundity of the prophetic utterance, its piercing theistic vision, its exceptional moral discernment and the anguish with which it is touched (for prophets do not arrive at the truth without suffering for it), which make it a word of God.'

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mentions as a clue to the secret of his own deepest convictions. Those who visit are expected to know the reference, of course. In Willie's own translation, it reads:

> You have been told what is good
> and what is it that Yahweh asks of you:
> only to do what is just, to love mercy
> and to walk modestly with your God.

It is appropriate.

H. G. M. WILLIAMSON
Fellow of the Academy

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