



JAMES BARR

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1924–2006

JAMES BARR WAS A BIBLICAL SCHOLAR, Semitist, and theologian, who combined these three skills with exceptional brilliance. He was among the foremost biblical specialists of his generation, and for his depth of insight into the study of the Bible he was in a class of his own. He illuminated every subject he touched.

James Barr was born on 20 March 1924 in Glasgow. His grandfather, also James, had been a well-known figure in Scotland, a minister of the Free Church (later the United Free Church), and for some years a Labour MP, who advocated a greater degree of independence for Scotland. His father, Allan, was also a minister of the United Free Church, the remnant of the Free Church that remained after it had united with the Church of Scotland in 1929. He attended Daniel Stewart's Academy in Edinburgh, and in these early years he already showed an exceptional aptitude for learning languages which subsequently enabled him to develop both a command of the ancient Semitic languages and also a knowledge of modern linguistic theory which had gained new direction and momentum from the 1920s onwards. He also became fluent in an enviable number of modern languages. He entered Edinburgh University in 1941 to read Classics, but his call-up in 1942 to military service, in which he distinguished himself as a capable and daring pilot in the Fleet Air Arm, interrupted his studies. He returned to the university in 1945 and completed his degree with a First in 1948. It was during his student years that he met Jane Hepburn from Perth, who also read Classics at Edinburgh University. They were married in 1950, and their long life together became known as one of the happiest marriages among their wide circle

of friends internationally. They had a daughter, Catherine, and two sons, Allan and Stephen, and two grandsons and a granddaughter.

Barr never considered any other profession than the ministry of the Church of Scotland, and upon graduating proceeded to New College, Edinburgh to study Theology and prepare for ordination. The course at New College was so structured that the final examinations required students to specialise in one of five main subject areas. Barr's academic background in Classics made equally possible New Testament and Patristics, though he had also shown a full capability of excelling in any of the subjects prescribed. He resolved the issue by choosing the first on the list, Old Testament, a specialism which, though he never confined himself to it but maintained interests across the wide range of theological studies—his first academic appointment was in New Testament—he never left.

He was ordained to the Church of Scotland ministry in 1951, and for two years served as minister of the Church of Scotland at Tiberias in Israel. This appointment turned out to be his only pastoral charge, though he continued to be an active churchman and throughout his life was frequently invited to preach in churches of different denominations. In later years, when he lived in Oxford, he worshipped at Christ Church, the Anglican cathedral, and upon moving to the USA he continued to attend Episcopalian churches.

He took full advantage of his tenure of the post at Tiberias to learn both Arabic and modern Hebrew, and to acquire as full a knowledge of the Holy Land as circumstances at the time would permit. But living conditions in the newly founded State of Israel at that time were harsh through food shortages and it was with no little relief that after two years Barr accepted an appointment as Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at the Presbyterian College in Montreal, a post which he held for two years (1953–5). His career in Old Testament studies began in 1955, when at the age of 31 he was appointed to the Chair of Old Testament Literature and Theology back at New College, Edinburgh where Norman Porteous, his teacher, mentor and friend, had held the Chair of Hebrew and Semitic Languages since 1938. It was at Edinburgh that he was soon to acquire an international reputation as a scholar of outstanding analytic and incisively critical power of thought and learning which in time made him one of the most sought after lecturers at theological and religious studies faculties worldwide.

His first book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961), was a 'landmark' contribution in the history of twentieth-century biblical studies. Rarely has a first book so instantly brought its author international recognition, though it also provoked much controversy and among some critics even a degree of hostility. The book was not previewed, so to speak, whether in the form of a journal article or review, and so has been variously described as a 'bombshell', a 'bolt out of the blue', etc. Effectively, it stopped in its tracks a movement known especially in the English-speaking theological world as the 'Biblical Theology Movement', which gained widespread appeal in the 1940s and 1950s as an outcrop of a more general revival of interest in the theological significance of the Bible that emerged in the post-First World War period. The movement was characterised by certain methods and emphases, of which the first was an interest in bringing out the unity and coherence of the Bible, and the second, as a corollary of this, bringing out its distinctiveness, since by setting the Bible in contrast with non-biblical thought its own inner coherence is emphasised. In fact, the establishment of the distinctiveness of biblical thought was not only a necessary part of the method; it was also a principal purpose of the method. It was argued that there was a special 'Hebrew world view' in the Bible, which lay encoded in the distinctive features of the Hebrew language. One of the chief ways in which the distinctiveness was argued was by an endeavour to draw a strong contrast between Hebrew and Greek thought. This in turn involved an attempt to show that the New Testament, though written in Greek, is in reality permeated by Hebrew thought. Thus the whole Bible was believed to stand in a monolithic solidarity against Greek thought. Biblical thought, it was argued, was characterised by a 'dynamic' rather than a (supposedly Greek) 'static' understanding of reality; it was based on verbs rather than nouns. A notable feature of the literature of the movement was a fondness for word studies which focused upon individual Greek words in the New Testament in an endeavour to show that their 'content' was in reality Hebraic. Scrutiny of the etymology of words in the belief that this was a source of illumination of the 'essential' meaning of a word was likewise characteristic of exegesis.

The Semantics of Biblical Language, as its name already suggests, focused especially upon the understanding of language that underlay the thinking of so much that was published by representatives of the Biblical Theology Movement, an understanding according to which a language coheres with and reflects a nation's mental makeup, including its religious thought and how it perceived the world and its relation with God. That

is, these scholars worked, for the most part unwittingly, with an understanding of language that derived ultimately from Idealism. There was little or even no perception of newer, modern ways of comprehending language which emerged and developed in the earlier decades of the twentieth century from the influential work of Ferdinand de Saussure. It is perhaps testimony to the lack of interest in this, or at least lack of knowledge of the modern study of linguistics in theological circles generally at that time, that one of England's leading biblical scholars upon reading the typescript of Barr's *Semantics of Biblical Language* described the word 'semantics' as 'jargon'. The book showed forcefully, however, that the notion of language that underpinned the central methods and procedures of the Biblical Theology Movement rested on ideas about language that were now entirely outdated among linguists. It dismantled the edifice that had been built on the supposition that there was something special about the Hebrew language, making it uniquely suited to convey divine truth, and it established an understanding of the semantics of the biblical languages grounded in up-to-date perceptions of how language functions. As a system of communication Hebrew functioned for the Israelite nation in the same way as other languages function; the meaning of words is primarily indicated by their context in sentences and in their contrast with other words; etymology, whilst of importance in, for example, an attempt to discern earlier stages in the history of a language group—for example, the Semitic group of languages—is no indication of the meaning of a word in a given context, since words have not only an origin but also a history within a spoken and written language. Further, the attempt to read off from a study of individual words in the lexical stock of the biblical languages the outlines of biblical thinking about a subject was a deeply flawed procedure. In a monograph that quickly followed his first book and with a similar cutting edge, Barr provided a detailed investigation and incisive critique of this procedure, choosing for special analysis well-known studies of Greek words for 'time' in the New Testament words (*Biblical Words for Time* (London, 1962)).

The Semantics of Biblical Language established Barr throughout the theological world as a major thinker, whose work had ramifications far beyond the narrow confines of Semitic or biblical studies and reached into the ways in which theology could legitimately use Scripture. But the book's rigorous and hard-hitting style of argument—no quarter was given!—also set up an image of him as a severe and unyielding opponent which was to feed into a reputation for destructiveness. The criticism was levelled that he was uninterested in biblical theology, a belief that per-

sisted even into a late period in his career. But such a reaction was in the face of Barr's many contributions to biblical theology. His Inaugural Lecture at Edinburgh in 1955 ('Tradition and Expectation in Ancient Israel') and a further early article ('The problem of Old Testament theology and the history of religion' (*Canadian Journal of Theology*, 3, 1957, 141–9)) already indicate his engagement with central issues in biblical theology from the earliest stages of his career. His major study—the longest book he wrote—*The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective*, though not published until 1999 (see below), was based upon the Cadbury Lectures given at the University of Birmingham as early as 1969, and incorporated also further thinking on the subject delivered in the Firth Lectures at the University of Nottingham in 1978. Earlier studies, for example his articles on 'Biblical Theology' in the Supplementary Volume to *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1974) and in *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* (Vol. I, 1985), but especially his still earlier *Old and New in Interpretation* (London, 1966), based on the Currie Lectures delivered at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Texas, in 1964, offer further evidence of his long-standing interest in biblical theology. Indeed, he described *Old and New in Interpretation* as 'the basis of the vision' presented in *The Concept of Biblical Theology*. In the latter he wrote of biblical theology that it had been 'a vastly creative undertaking, without which biblical scholarship would have been very incomplete', even though the study of the subject had had its 'aberrations' (p. 236), and it was with these 'aberrations' that he was concerned in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* and *Biblical Words for Time*.

He records that he was frequently asked why in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* he had not accompanied his critique of recently employed methods of understanding the Bible with an outline of a 'new method', thus giving the book a more constructive objective alongside its otherwise 'negative' content and tone. His response was that in criticising dominant features of the Biblical Theology Movement he 'assumed normal exegetical procedure'. 'What was necessary, as I saw it', he wrote, 'was not a new method, but a correction of *aberrations* which had crept unnoticed into existing method. I had confidence in exegetical scholarship . . .' (*The Concept of Biblical Theology*, p. 236). That he was a 'negative' scholar was an unjust interpretation of a work that had in fact had a major positive contribution to make to biblical studies. And the proof of this is that within but a few years of the publication of *The Semantics of Biblical Language* and *Biblical Words for Time*, dominant features and strongly held convictions characteristic of the Biblical Theology

Movement were dissolving and waning. Thus, the emphasis on the unity of the Bible gave way to an interest in its diversity, and the 'unity of the Bible' was no longer considered to be a decisive principle either for exegetical problems or for the application of the Bible to questions of our own time. There took place also a sharp reduction of emphasis on the contrast of Hebrew thought and Greek thought, whilst the popularity of 'word-studies' and the lexically based approach to theology had also greatly waned. Barr himself wrote in a postscript to the second edition of *Biblical Words for Time* (1969) that 'the loss of confidence in those methods, the sense that something has been wrong with them, is a matter of fact . . . and has been widespread' (p. 171).

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Even as *The Semantics of Biblical Language* was being published, and after only six years in his Professorship at Edinburgh, in 1961 Barr migrated again, this time to the United States to take up an appointment as Professor of Old Testament Literature and Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. It was known that the Barrs had found life in Edinburgh less congenial than they had expected. For an additional and rather different reason, however, friends were not surprised at James's departure from his *alma mater*, for among those whose work came in for rigorous criticism in *The Semantics of Biblical Language* was his colleague at New College, T. F. Torrance, Professor of Christian Dogmatics there since 1952, already a dominant presence in the faculty and a leading figure in the Church of Scotland of which he was later to be elected Moderator of the General Assembly. Barr's lengthy critique of Torrance's contributions in biblical exegesis was nothing less than trenchant, at times, indeed, bordering on scorn. Neither at the time nor later did Torrance concede that Barr had made a case against the use of language which he and others had employed, including the sort of 'concept' approach provided by word studies and etymology, and he described Barr's 'attack' as 'ill-judged'. The tone of Barr's various criticisms of Torrance's views is such that it is not difficult to discern that there was already a degree of animosity between the two colleagues before the publication of the book. The rift between them was irremediable and enduring (see Barr's comments in *The Concept of Biblical Theology*, p. 665 n. 30). Quite apart from other reasons for his acceptance of the appointment at Princeton, therefore, Barr would have welcomed an

opportunity to move from a situation where, after the publication of his book, acrimony was scarcely likely to subside.

Barr remained at Princeton for only four years before returning to England in 1965 as Professor of Semitic Languages and Literatures at Manchester University in succession to Edward Ullendorff, who had been appointed Professor of Ethiopian Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University. It was during his years at Princeton that he delivered (1964) the Currie Lectures (see above), the first of a number of distinguished named lectures which he was invited to deliver at various Universities and Seminaries internationally during his career. In addition to a number of shorter publications, his main research at Princeton was for his next major book, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*, which he completed during the early years of his tenure of the Chair at Manchester (see below).

At Manchester Barr took over from Ullendorff and C. F. Beckingham the editorship of *The Journal of Semitic Studies*, which H. H. Rowley, Ullendorff's immediate predecessor at Manchester, had initiated in 1956. Like Rowley, Barr also delivered periodic public lectures at the John Rylands University Library at Manchester which were subsequently published in the Library's *Bulletin*. These lectures, intended for intelligent lay audiences, dealt with a range of topics and were unfailingly popular. Some are masterpieces of concise exposition: for example, 'The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—a study of terminology' (1968); 'The symbolism of names in the Old Testament' (1969); 'Man and Nature—the ecological controversy and the Old Testament' (1972). Others were stimulating and fascinating discussions of such topics as 'Which language did Jesus speak?—Some remarks of a Semitist' (1970); 'The Book of Job and its modern interpreters' (1971); 'Reading the Bible as literature' (1973); 'Philo of Byblos and his "Phoenician History"' (1974). To these he later added 'The Bible as a political document' (1980), and 'Why the world was created in 4004 BC: Archbishop Ussher and biblical chronology' (1985).

But his primary endeavour immediately upon taking up the Chair at Manchester was the completion and publication of *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968). There is a 'family likeness', so to speak, between this book and *The Semantics of Biblical Language* in that, like the latter, Barr here provides a thorough critique of a major trend in current Old Testament research, in this instance the use of the cognate languages for elucidating obscure words and meanings in the Hebrew Bible. There was nothing new or modern about such a procedure; medieval rabbinic commentators had called

upon their knowledge of Arabic in attempting to shed light upon obscure words in the text of Scripture. The use of such a comparative method for illuminating difficult texts continued among both Jewish and Christian commentators in subsequent centuries, but much more favoured in modern times was a resort to textual emendation to gain a word more familiar from the lexicon of Biblical Hebrew. The substantial increase in our knowledge of ancient Semitic languages in the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century brought a change, however, and increasingly the comparative method became the primary means of tackling lexical obscurities and finding meanings, to the extent, indeed, that emendation, once so favoured, now became something to be employed only as a last resort. The result has been numerous proposals of hitherto unknown Hebrew words in the Hebrew Bible whose meanings, it is maintained, had been lost as a result of a reduced awareness of a much wider range of vocabulary that once was in familiar use by ancient Israelites and which modern scholarship because of our greatly increased knowledge of the languages and lexical stock of their ancient near Eastern neighbours can now restore.

Barr had no quarrel with the use of such a comparative method. In this respect this book differs from his earlier work on exegesis where the method itself was exposed as deeply flawed. What he saw as crucial, however, in the case of this major trend in the study of the Hebrew text was a critical assessment of its application, including, for example, the question of what safeguards are in place in transferring the use of a word in the language of, let us say, an east Semitic nation such as the Assyrians, to the different environment of ancient Israelites at a different period altogether in history from the historical context of the Assyrian texts from which the supposed solution to an obscurity in the Hebrew text is derived. Further, the sheer number of homonyms in Hebrew resulting from the labours of scholars in search of solutions to problems in the Hebrew text was itself a cause for caution and pause for thought. Can we be seriously confident that in the course of the history of the transmission of the text of the Hebrew Bible, so many meanings could have been lost? Does not the testimony of the ancient versions, especially the Septuagint, prompt scepticism against any suggestion that the number of supposed forgotten meanings in the Hebrew Bible is as extensive as the accumulated examples which the efforts of modern researchers have yielded? Thus Barr examines such issues as: the history of the transmission of meanings in Hebrew and the value of the ancient versions in considering this; the distribution of homonyms; the importance of the Masoretic vocalisation of the con-

sonantal text, which is so often cavalierly dispensed with in determining a new meaning for a word; and late Hebrew and the loss of vocabulary.

Briefly stated, Barr's conclusion was that an enthusiasm for the appeal to comparative philology had run away with itself and had produced an implausibly large number of new words in the Hebrew lexicon. The same fate would befall this method of explication as befell the use of emendation; that is, an ultimate scepticism would hang over philological treatments of such texts if its procedures are pressed recklessly and uncritically. He called for a much more responsible and informed use of the method and also for less hostility towards emendation, which can equally in some cases be the natural solution to a textual difficulty.

As with *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, some critics again described the book on comparative philology as extreme and negative. In an essay a few years after the publication of the book, Barr summed up his response to his critics in this way:

[T]here is nothing wrong with the *method* of using cognate languages in order to derive novel senses for Hebrew words; but of all the products said to have been derived from this method in the last decades, only a small proportion are satisfactory. Those who think this judgement too negative have a simple course open to them: they can print the list of such suggestions which they personally consider to have been established beyond doubt. The judgement which I passed upon the products of this method in my book, though subject to some modification in proportions, is, I believe, in its basic structure a right and fair one; and, far from taking any extreme position, I believe that in making this judgement I have spoken for the central current of Old Testament scholarship, in which I have confidence. ('Philology and Exegesis', in C. Brekelmans (ed.), *Questions Disputées D'ancien Testament: Méthode et Théologie* (Leuven, 1974), pp. 60 f.)

Even as reviews of *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* were being written and published, Barr's strictures against an over-confident employment of the comparative method and the failure to think through its possible limitations and pitfalls were soon to receive vindication from a wholly unexpected source. *The New English Bible (NEB) Old Testament* was published in 1970, the work of translation having been commissioned in 1948. Here indeed, as soon became apparent, was over-confidence in the philological means of solving obscurities of the Hebrew text. It was 'the first major translation in which literally hundreds of passages are drastically affected by this treatment' (Barr, 'After five years: a retrospect on two major translations of the Bible', *Heythrop Journal*, 15, 1974, 381–405). The sheer number of new readings it derived from words in cognate languages rendered the very validity of the *NEB*,

announced as being based upon the best results of modern research, dependent upon the sound application of the comparative method and careful scrutiny of the results it yielded in a way that would not have been so if such novel readings appeared only occasionally. Yet many of the new readings were 'here introduced for the first time, and most of them had never been subjected to the critique of scholarly discussion . . . or been taken up into the general current of Old Testament exegesis' (p. 385). Indeed, a good number of them, Barr pointed out, were quite unknown to scholars 'who are left open-mouthed, asking one another how the translators obtained from the Hebrew the meanings that they did' (p. 387). Thus, 'in so far as concerns the philological basis of the translation, it is quite wrong to suppose that the *NEB* rests on a consensus of what is best in modern scholarship. On the contrary, it depends, again and again, on an extremely narrow line of interpretation' (p. 386); these new readings 'often represent an isolated, eccentric and idiosyncratic position within the total world of Old Testament scholarship' (p. 387). Barr wrote that he personally could not believe 'that more than a limited number of these novel interpretations can have seemed convincing to most of the scholars on the Old Testament panel' (p. 386). Whatever the explanation for what was finally published 'it is impossible to avoid the judgement', Barr commented, 'that the panel, in respect of the philological issues, was unable to uphold the general sense or consensus of Old Testament scholars against the pressure of the particular philological trends which had in fact been so influential' (p. 388).

The Chairman and Convenor of the Old Testament panel from 1957 to the completion of the translation was Professor G. R. (later Sir Godfrey) Driver, the leading British Semitist at the time, who had also been a member of the panel throughout the project. Although Barr does not refer directly to Sir Godfrey, no one then or today doubts that it was his forceful personality and his unshakable self-assurance in the philological method, with which he had worked extensively, that were the prevailing influence upon successive panels in the production of the translation. Well before Barr's review of the *NEB* in 1974, however, the disquiet of scholars, not to mention the disappointment or even bewilderment of ordinary readers, with the new translation gathered momentum and in that same year Oxford University Press commissioned a revision under the chairmanship of W. D. McHardy, then Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford, who had also been a member of the *NEB* panel. Among the instructions to the panel was that the many 'Driverisms', as they were

now widely dubbed, in the *NEB* required most careful scrutiny and, where desirable, excision.

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Not least among the most striking features of *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* was the sheer industry that went into it. Virtually each chapter required a special expertise, and the compilation of the book's index of several hundred Hebrew words intended for use in conjunction with the discussion in the book, and each of which had been the subject of philological treatment and all of which Barr had carefully examined, would itself have been a daunting task. There followed a number of shorter studies of various aspects of philology and exegesis, philology and linguistics, studies of the comparative philological treatment of individual words, but especially several papers on lexicography which reveal the thought he was devoting to problems of how, within the context of modern linguistic research and methods, a revised and updated dictionary of Classical Hebrew would be edited.

Some years before Barr's book on comparative philology, Oxford University Press had commissioned a new edition of the *Oxford Hebrew Dictionary* published in 1907 by F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. R. Briggs (BDB). In 1970 its editor, Professor D. Winton Thomas, Regius Professor Emeritus of Hebrew at Cambridge, died suddenly, and Professor J. B. (Ben) Segal, Professor of Semitic Languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, succeeded him. Following the death of Thomas the extensive materials which he had garnered as well as his own draft of a new edition of BDB, which he had completed up to and including the letter *kaph*, were brought to Oxford for the continuation of the work and its completion. Segal retired from the editorship in 1974 and Barr accepted the Press's invitation to succeed him, and he and Jane and their family moved residence from Manchester to Oxford to enable him to devote more time to the resources there for the work on the dictionary, commuting weekly during term time to Manchester to fulfil his professional responsibilities and duties there. Barr was subsequently appointed a Delegate of the Press in 1979, an appointment which he retained until 1989 when he retired from the Chair at Oxford, attending the fortnightly meetings and reading manuscripts and proposals, not only in theology, but also in linguistics, ancient history, and classics.

Barr's own reflections on lexicography render it clear that under his editorship the new BDB would have departed in significant ways from the arrangement and format of its earlier editions and from the method employed by Thomas. This itself meant that much of what Thomas had written would have to be reworked according to different principles. It became a matter of concern to the Press that in effect the project would in important ways have to be started anew, thus involving substantial and unexpected fresh investment and, further, that the completion and publication of the dictionary would require a much longer time span than hitherto anticipated. Reviewing the project in 1980, the Press's committee charged with overseeing and monitoring its progress found that during the decade since the death of Thomas virtually nothing had been added to his work, whether under the editorship of Segal or of Barr. As a result the Press abandoned the project.

Though he urged the Press, both as Editor and as a Delegate, to continue the project, no one knew better than Barr himself the time and effort that work on the new dictionary, applying the methods and principles of modern research, would demand, and other calls upon his time, as well as his wider interests, render it unlikely that, for all his energy and efficiency, he could have attended to the editorship of the dictionary in the expeditious manner that would have been expected and, indeed, that he himself would have intended. By the 1970s he was very much in demand as a visiting lecturer, whether at British universities or abroad. During his years as Professor at Manchester he had been a visiting Professor at Jerusalem (1973), Chicago (1975) and Strasbourg (1975–6), and had in addition delivered the Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham (1969), the Faculty Lectures at Cardiff (1969), the Croall Lectures at Edinburgh (1970), and was Grinfield Lecturer on the Septuagint at Oxford, which required an annual series of lectures during the years 1974–8, and had made time during his later tenure of the Oriel Professorship to carry out some research at Göttingen under the auspices of the Septuagint Project of the Göttingen Academy of Sciences which was published as *The Typology of Literalism in the Septuagint* (Göttingen, 1979; see below). Anyone who knew James Barr knew how very much he enjoyed these engagements, and especially the opportunity they provided to concentrate on various issues on which he wished to think and write. Thus the Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1964 yielded *Old and New in Interpretation* (1966; see below), the Croall Lectures at Edinburgh issued in the publication of *The Bible in the Modern World* (London, 1973; see below), whilst as noted above his later

The Concept of Biblical Theology was based upon the Cadbury Lectures given at the University of Birmingham and incorporated also further thinking on the subject delivered in the Firth Lectures at the University of Nottingham in 1978. The demanding work manifestly required to advance progress on the new BDB would assuredly have placed a restraint upon his time both for the special lectures he was so frequently invited to deliver and for the many other subjects which his wide-ranging interests prompted. When, a few years later in the 1980s, a project to produce a new *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* was launched at Sheffield University, under the editorship of Professor David Clines, it was a happy outcome that Winton Thomas's draft was dispatched to Clines and his team of co-workers. This new dictionary is now nearing completion.

The Manchester years also saw the publication of the Currie Lectures and the Croall Lectures referred to above. The former was a masterly study of the much debated question of the relationship of Old and New Testaments in the light of recent German writing on the subject. But it also dealt with a number of current theories, some of which had already been discussed in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. These included what Barr called 'purism', the idea that the Bible should be interpreted entirely from within, not bringing to bear any concepts from the general intellectual world and especially not from philosophy; the Hebrew–Greek thought contrast, already demolished in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*; and the centrality of history and revelation in biblical interpretation, then common in both German and American theology, the latter particularly among those influenced by Barth.

Many themes in *Old and New in Interpretation* would recur in Barr's later work, most notably perhaps the insistence that the Bible alone does not make up the whole content of Christian faith. Just as for the people of New Testament times there was already a Scripture, so that their faith did not begin from scratch but rested on a substratum that already existed (there could be a Christ only in a world where a Christ was expected, as Barr puts it), so for the modern Christian much is already given, in tradition, in secular wisdom, in philosophical thought. The gospel is not a clean break with all this, but assumes it as a starting-point. This is of a piece with Barr's later defence of natural theology and his refusal to let biblical study be confined to a confessional ghetto: as he put it, there are good theological reasons why there needs to be non-theological study of the Bible. The Bible belongs to the world as well as to the church. Here the lines of thought that would lead to his opposition to Brevard Childs's 'canonical approach' are already adumbrated (see below).

It was a corollary of Barr's thinking about the Bible and the content of Christian faith that theology—systematic or doctrinal theology—had its own integrity as an exposition of the gospel, the good news that Christianity has to offer to the world. He did not believe that that message was contained only in the Bible, and for that reason was able to see the exegesis of the Bible as freed from the constraint of always having to be doctrinally sound. Because the faith was not equivalent to the contents of the Bible, the Bible could be read freely and allowed to mean what it actually meant, not what Christian faith might like to think it meant. Barr had come from an evangelical background in the Scottish church, and until the end he would perhaps have described himself as still an evangelical in the sense that his central theological concern was with 'the gospel', the liberating message of salvation. In *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, 1984) he wrote:

The basis of evangelicalism is the gospel . . . The gospel is a message of good news that has to be preached and that calls man to faith and through faith to salvation . . . Salvation does not come automatically through belonging to a system or an institution, but only as the person is gripped in the inner heart, convinced of his need for salvation, and made ready to reach out and receive it. The gospel, in this evangelical sense, is fully scriptural, in the sense that it is embedded in scripture: it lies within scripture, and scripture supports and witnesses to that gospel of free grace. But it is not identical with scripture. (p. 14)

Introducing a conceptual space between the gospel and the Bible enables one to be more relaxed about biblical interpretation and thus more likely to read what is actually there in Scripture rather than what one would like to find. Distancing the Bible from theology is essential if the Bible is to be properly interpreted. It leads to a concentration on what he called the 'factuality' of the text, which encompasses everything from its macro-structures to the spelling of its Hebrew words. One sees this already in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, where his great concern is that Hebrew and Greek shall be understood as linguistic systems in their own right, not corralled into being vehicles of a theological system one is determined to find somehow encoded in them. Christian faith 'is not purely an understanding of the Bible; rather, it is a relation to really existing persons, a relation which is communicated, enriched and controlled through the Bible'. Hence Barr was no biblical 'maximalist', but believed that theology had its own proper sphere of operation and its own integrity, which the biblical scholar should respect at the same time as expecting an equal respect for his or her own exegetical work.

The Croall Lectures at Edinburgh (1970), though delivered only eight years after the publication of *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, reflect a markedly changed and changing climate in theological thinking generally than prevailed when his earlier book was being written. Not least among the new trends was fresh uncertainty about the status and value of the Bible which had virtually dominated the theological agenda in the 1940s and 1950s. The term ‘authority’ itself came in for questioning and especially from the standpoint of ‘cultural relativism’: what authority, what relevance, could this ancient collection of writings from a very different culture have when confronted by modern twentieth-century problems and issues? The unity of the Bible, so central to the Biblical Theology Movement, now gave way to a new interest in its very diversity which in turn was used to assign different values to different parts of the Bible, with a considerable tendency to downgrade the Old Testament. Even in preaching, radical voices questioned why preaching should necessarily be from a biblical text rather than from a text by a modern-day writer as a means whereby the church could declare what it believes today. Barr was careful not to exaggerate the extent of this questioning of the status of the Bible: ‘We are not dealing with a worked-out doctrine which “denies the authority of the Bible”, but with something vaguer and more intangible’ (*The Bible in the Modern World*, p. 10); the questioning represented an outflanking of traditional views rather than a head-on clash with them. Barr believed that underlying the new mood and its radicalism was ‘the breakdown of the Bible as the fundamental orientation for western man’—hence the reason for the title of the book *The Bible in the Modern World*—adding that ‘Whether or not we accept this analysis, it is worth pondering as one profound summary of the present situation’ (pp. 110 f.). The book thus centres upon the issue of whether an account of the status of the Bible within the Christian faith in the modern world can be given, and on what principles such an account can be built, and what purpose it will serve.

During these years Barr was also preparing his well-known study of *Fundamentalism* (London, 1977), a subject in which he had had a long-standing interest. He himself had never been a fundamentalist, but his evangelical background—as a student he had been a member of the Christian Union—meant that he had been close to people who were, and he could understand the attractions of the movement from the inside, as it were. It was a subject that engaged his mind throughout his career. In an Appendix in *Old and New in Interpretation* he wrote a note on

fundamentalism with specific reference to its understanding of revelation, and his 1977 book was followed by many articles on various aspects of fundamentalism. The book was not written for the sake of controversy with fundamentalists, or ‘in order to produce arguments that will make them feel they are wrong or cause them to change their minds’ (p. 9); its primary purpose was an attempt to understand an intellectual structure that Barr knew well would be little affected by these arguments anyway. A further motivation for the book, he explained, was that the description and analysis which the book offers might assist theologians and biblical scholars to recognise more correctly what the issues are, and thereby avoid both over-reactions and reactions in a mistaken direction. He wrote of a further intention or, rather, hope which he held: that the many, especially among evangelicals, who felt under pressure from the arguments of fundamentalists and are impressed by the seeming attractiveness of their position, might be helped by the book ‘to make an intelligent and deliberate decision in their uncertainty’ (p. 10). In a subsequent article ‘The problem of fundamentalism today’ published in his *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London, 1980) he wrote of the great deal of further discussion in which he had been involved since the publication of the book, and of the many letters he had received as well as visits and interviews and of how all this had given him ‘a vivid further perception of the deep perplexity and often suffering experienced by people who either themselves or through their dear ones are caught up in the influence of fundamentalism’. It is a measure of how concerned Barr was with the phenomenon of fundamentalism that he subsequently published a short study *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (London, 1984) with an avowedly pastoral purpose: to show evangelicals how to remain evangelical while avoiding the absurdities of extreme biblical conservatism.

Though some people were undoubtedly helped by it, most evangelical reviewers failed to see it as anything more than a continued attack on their position, even though it disclosed Barr’s own commitment to a strong version of the Christian gospel of free redemption through Christ. ‘Inerrantist’ critics of his writings always assumed that he was a theological liberal, and took this to imply that he did not believe in divine revelation. Certainly he was opposed to dictation theories about the Bible—though many much more conservative theologians regard dictation as a distortion too—but he was clear that God had let us know things we would not have known, left to our own devices; he would have assented to the proposition ‘the Bible tells us what we cannot tell ourselves’. Such revelation however in a sense preceded Scripture rather than

being embedded in it. Striking here is his dictum 'Unlike the situation in modern theology, there is [in the Bible] no problem of revelation which has to be solved or overcome . . . What you learn about God in the Bible is not the first contact with deity, it is new information about a person you already know.' This is another idea that has a certain relativising tendency where the authority of Scripture is concerned, since it means that the heart of revelation lies behind or before Scripture rather than in it, thus once again liberating the Bible from the need to carry the whole weight of our theological quest. Nevertheless the revelation that lies behind the Bible cannot be tapped into without studying the Bible. We learn from the Old Testament what kind of God the people of Israel believed in. They did not believe in this God because of the Old Testament, as Barr liked to point out; for the people of the Bible there was as yet no Bible, a point even more obvious where the New Testament is concerned. God was known in Israel through many means, but until quite a late time not through the medium of a Scripture, even though the thinking that would lead in the direction of a Scripture did begin in Israel comparatively early: Barr would probably have seen Deuteronomy as the earliest example of this.

By the time James Barr returned to England to the Chair in Manchester he had already acquired an international reputation as one of the leading biblical scholars of the time, and various distinctions and honours were conferred upon him during these years and subsequently. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1969, and in the same year became also a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society. In 1975 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of the School of Oriental and African Studies. The Göttingen Academy of Sciences elected him a Corresponding Member in 1976, to be followed by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in 1977. Other such honours were conferred upon him in later years. He became a Corresponding Member of The Royal Society of Sciences, Uppsala in 1991, and in 1993 a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Member of the American Philosophical Society. Honorary degrees were conferred upon him by Knox College Toronto (1964), Dubuque (1974), St Andrew's (1974), Edinburgh (1983), the University of South Africa (1986), Victoria University, Toronto (1988), the Protestant Theological Faculty, Paris (1988), Oslo (1991), Helsinki (1997). He was President of the Society for Old Testament Study in 1973 and of the British Association of Jewish Studies in 1978.

A new period in his career began in 1976 when he was elected Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture at Oxford and Fellow of Oriel College in succession to Professor H. F. D. Sparks. Old Testament studies in Oxford had reached a low ebb at that time, and Barr rapidly revitalised them by establishing a research seminar for the benefit of younger colleagues and graduate students, and attracting visiting scholars from many countries to come and give papers. His inaugural lecture in May 1977, *Does Biblical Study Still Belong to Theology?*, set out the importance of the theological context within which biblical study should be undertaken, while allowing scope for those whose work on the Bible was of a non-theological, humanistic character with results that can yield new insights which existing traditions and fashions of doctrine can easily distort or obscure. The lecture suggests that the two approaches, one from the standpoint of the Bible as a document of faith, the other from a historical and general humanistic perspective, may be combined in a salutary way. Scarcely had he delivered this lecture, however, than he was invited to accept appointment as Regius Professor of Hebrew, which is a crown appointment at Oxford. He migrated to the Regius Professorship in 1978 and to Christ Church, the college where the holder of this Chair is *ex officio* a Student (i.e. Fellow). Barr was of course singularly well equipped to hold either Chair, at home alike in the diverse aspects of Old Testament teaching and research, including its interface with theology, or in the more linguistic and textual expertise necessary for a holder of the Regius Professorship of Hebrew, which is officially attached to the Faculty of Oriental Studies rather than to the Faculty of Theology.

Early in his tenure of the Hebrew Chair he published the fruits of a period of research carried out in Göttingen under the auspices of the Septuagint Project of the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and published as *The Typology of Literalism in the Septuagint* (Göttingen, 1979), a perceptive study of the senses in which the LXX translators can be called 'literalists' or 'free translators'. In this short work one sees Barr's determination always to ask his own questions and not to be corralled by accepted opinion: the term 'literal' has often been applied in studying the ancient versions of the Bible, but no one had previously analysed just what this might actually mean. This had been treated as a self-evident term. Barr's characteristically acute examination of what 'literal' and 'free' would have meant to ancient translators laid the foundations for a much more nuanced approach to the ancient translators and their concerns.

As Regius Professor of Hebrew Barr continued to write on a variety of interests in lexicography, in philological, grammatical and textual

problems in the Hebrew Bible, as well as writing critical reviews of major publications such as the new edition of Rudolph Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* completed and published under the title *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* in 1977. In 1986 he delivered the Schweich Lectures of the British Academy which were subsequently published as *The Variable Spellings of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford, 1989), a detailed study of the variation between *plene* and *defective* spellings of vowels in the received Hebrew text (the Masoretic text). The topic arose directly from his preparatory work for the new *Oxford Hebrew Dictionary*, more specifically from his consideration of how words spelt in more than one way—that is, with (*plene*) and without (*defective*) vowel letters—are to be listed, since this might mean that a word spelt with vowel letters might be listed many pages away from its shorter form without vowel letters. This was a problem of practical lexicography, but the variable readings themselves—there are many thousands of them—are a remarkable and puzzling characteristic of the Masoretic text. Barr's primary purpose was to plot out and to observe the distribution of the sorts of spelling, as they are found in the Hebrew Bible, word-type by word-type, individual word by individual word, and book by book or section by section with a view to discerning what these spelling patterns are. Barr's close examination of the phenomenon showed that each book, as it has come down to us in the Masoretic Text, has its own profile where spelling is concerned. If his theological treatments of the Bible are often refreshingly broad-brush, this work showed an intense concentration on the most minute details of the text—resembling in this respect his work on biblical chronological systems, a topic that interested him throughout his life (see his Rylands lectures 'Why the World was Created in 4004 BC' (mentioned above), and 'Luther and biblical chronology' (1990)).

Throughout his tenure of the Regius Professorship, however, his major publications were theological in character. In 1980 he published *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* which brought together a number of already published essays, but adding three new studies: 'Historical Reading and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture', 'Has the Bible any Authority?', and 'The Problem of Fundamentalism'. In this same year he also published a highly critical review in the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* of Brevard Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979). He viewed Childs's 'canonical approach' to biblical interpretation as marginalising all the work of historical criticism which 'is depicted in rather dark colours', for although the *Introduction* acknowledges the contributions made by critical scholarship, yet 'practically

nowhere does Childs concede that it has made a quite *decisive* difference to our understanding of Scripture . . . All this will be deeply welcome to conservative opinion, all the more so because a clearly non-conservative scholar has written it' (p. 15), Barr's passion about such an approach pouring over into the comment that 'it will all be quoted by conservative polemicists for the next hundred years'. To Barr it seemed that the attempt to force the biblical interpreter to concentrate only on the message of the Bible in its final, 'canonical' form—and in any event, which 'canon' was to be normative?—instead of being free to investigate earlier stages in the text's growth, was a deeply conservative move not too distant from fundamentalism. Childs's 'canonical approach' remained a preoccupation of Barr for the rest of his career, since he considered such an approach, which attracted a strong body of support especially in the United States, to be as wrong-headed as the earlier Biblical Theology Movement criticised in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. Childs was an old friend, but Barr's continued attacks on his system (which Childs countered both in correspondence with Barr as well as in published responses) strained relations between them somewhat—though later each contributed to the other's *Festschrift*.

There followed in 1982 Barr's Sprunt Lectures at Richmond Theological Seminary in Virginia which were published as *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford, 1983). Though wider in scope than simply a critique of Childs's 'canonical approach', there is scarcely a chapter that does not engage to a greater or lesser extent with central issues raised by Childs's ideas, and there is an Appendix of over forty pages with the title 'Further Thoughts on Canonical Criticism'. From his own review and assessment of recent research on the concept of the 'canon', Barr concludes, again with Childs's work in mind, that the results of new thinking about 'canon' have been 'fatal to the notion that the idea of the canon is of first-rate importance for biblical Christianity. Scripture is essential, but canon is not. Canon is a derivative, a secondary or tertiary, concept of great interest but not of the highest theological importance. It is unlikely in face of the biblical evidence that it can be made into the cornerstone of any convincing biblical theology' (pp. 63 f.). In his later *The Concept of Biblical Theology* he again discussed the work of Childs at length, now contending that the project had in effect been abandoned (see esp. pp. 422–4).

Barr's critique of Childs's proposed hermeneutic was consonant with his scepticism of hermeneutics if by that is meant a set of techniques for extracting the correct Christian meaning from Scripture, though not of

course uninterested in it if it is taken to mean simply the theory of textual interpretation; much of his work could certainly be called hermeneutical in that sense. But he was wary of writers who had ‘a hermeneutic’, a procedure for ensuring that the Bible would give the ‘right’ answer to our questions. There is a hermeneutical solution to the question of the relation of the two Testaments, put forward by Paul Ricoeur, for whose work in other ways he had a very high regard. Ricoeur argues that Christianity was essentially a rereading of the Old Testament in a kind of new mode. Barr was doubtful about that, arguing that Christianity rested on the idea that something genuinely new had arrived, for which the existing scriptures were not a sufficient matrix: ‘The business of the New Testament is not primarily to tell what the Old really means, but to declare a new substance which for the Old was not yet there . . . The task of the New Testament was not primarily to interpret the Old, but to interpret that new substance . . . In spite of the massive use of the Old Testament and its networks of meaning, the New Testament is more like creative literature than like exegesis’ (*Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority*, p. 70). Here again we see that theology is not simply the Bible, but a reality that breaks the mould of the existing scriptures. It may be a surprise to find someone who was primarily an Old Testament scholar refusing the offer of a theory that would make the Old Testament so central to the Christian faith, but Barr was clear that Christianity was more than a new way of reading an old text; rather, it recognised a new input into the human situation by God, which in some measure necessarily relativised the existing scriptures. The theological theory here is perhaps more nearly Lutheran than Calvinist, in spite of Barr’s Presbyterian roots, though it can certainly not be called Marcionite. The Old Testament remains essential as the matrix from which Christianity emerged, but it is not enough in itself for the exposition of the gospel. Hermeneutics, however important, will not bridge this gap.

Barr’s years as Regius Professor of Hebrew were marked by many further distinctions conferred upon him (see above) and continuing invitations to deliver distinguished lecture series. Thus he gave the Firth Lectures in Nottingham in 1978, the Clark Lectures at Pomona in 1981, the Laidlaw Lectures at Knox College Toronto in 1981, the Sprunt Lectures in Richmond, Virginia in 1982, the Sanderson Lectures in Ormond College, Melbourne in 1982, the British Academy Schweich Lectures in 1986, the Cole Lectures in Vanderbilt in 1988, and the Sarum Lectures in Oxford in 1989. He was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1985, and was a Visiting Professor at a

number of universities: the University of Chicago (1981), Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island (1985), the University of Otago, New Zealand (1986), the University of South Africa (1986), and was Ann Potter Wilson Distinguished Visiting Professor at Vanderbilt University in 1987–8.

Although his colleagues in the Faculty at Oxford admired Barr's scholarship and saluted his prodigious application in research, it was no secret that they were disappointed, indeed aggrieved, in the matter of the amount of teaching he was willing to provide for the faculty's undergraduate students. (He had few graduate students.) In most subjects, for example Theology, undergraduate teaching is largely college-based, students receiving person to person tutorials by their college tutors, the more formal lectures or classes being arranged and provided at faculty level. In the case of the much smaller numbers of students studying for a degree in the subjects offered by the Faculty of Oriental Studies—for example in Hebrew language and literature—however, both the formal lectures and classes and the day-to-day teaching are very largely arranged and provided by the faculty itself. There is necessarily therefore a much greater degree of interaction with the students at faculty level, making greater demands upon the teaching staff. Further, since most students have no knowledge of Hebrew upon coming to the university, language teaching from elementary to advanced levels as well as classes on prescribed texts, which necessarily form a significant part of the course, considerably increases the teaching load of the lecturers in the faculty. As Regius Professor of Hebrew, however, Barr broke with the practice of his predecessors who had customarily provided more teaching than the terms of appointment to the chair statutorily required (thirty-six lectures/classes per year). The sense of grievance among his colleagues was all the more in view of his not infrequent absences whilst lecturing in other universities, whether in the United Kingdom or abroad. It was disappointing too for the further reason that he was in fact an exceptionally gifted lecturer and teacher, absorbingly interesting and stimulating—invariably so—with no lack of humour and wit. There had been similar disappointment and frustration in the faculty at Manchester at his frequent absences with the reduced accessibility to him which this entailed both for his colleagues and for students, especially so during the last few years of his tenure of his chair there.

By the late 1980s retirement from his Oxford appointment at the statutory age of 67 was looming and held no attraction for him. At a memorial service at Christ Church Cathedral, his son Allan spoke of 'movement' as a perennial feature of his father's career: 'he thrived on change and was always invigorated by the prospect of lecturing, writing, and living in a new and different environment'; retirement from a fully active academic life was an event to be postponed as long as possible. And so, his son explained, his father had no hesitation in accepting an invitation from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where there was much more flexibility about the age of retirement than at British universities, to take up an appointment as Professor of Hebrew Bible. He took up his appointment in 1989, and upon reaching the age of 70 in 1994 was given the title of Distinguished Professor which he held until he retired in 1998.

His Vanderbilt years were happy ones, with congenial colleagues and able teaching and research assistants, and he continued to be highly productive as well as a frequent visitor to Europe and especially to Britain. The most significant publication of his Vanderbilt years was the Gifford Lectures, delivered at Edinburgh University in 1991 and published as *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford, 1993). Here he returned to a theme already broached in earlier articles, the defence of natural theology against the Barthian condemnation of it by showing that there are signs of such a theology within the very citadel of the Bible itself. Barr, who once confessed that it was a Barthian God whom he worshipped, came to believe that Barth had done theology a grave disservice by his insistence on its radical breach with all natural human culture—a move understandable against the background of the threat from National Socialism, but in itself theologically inadequate. One could see Barr's defence of natural theology as yet another example, perhaps a rather more extreme one, of his overriding concern that theology is not simply dependent on the Bible. But here there is something of a paradox, for one of his great concerns was to argue for natural theology in the Bible itself. In these lectures he showed that many of the biblical writers were themselves hospitable to the idea of a natural knowledge of God. Revelation is not only not the whole story in Christian theology; it was not the whole story even for those from whom the Bible derives. If this can be shown, as Barr thought it could, then the theological theory of the total depravity of the human intellect is no longer tenable, since human minds can at least in some measure know God even without divine revelation. Humankind is not so 'fallen' that it is cut off from all possibility of a natural knowledge of the divine.

By thus adding a critique of Barth to his earlier attacks on fundamentalism, Barr was felt by many evangelicals to have sold out to 'liberalism'. Yet his faith remained rooted in Scripture, and he devoted so much attention and care to analysing what he saw as unsound and inadequate exegesis precisely because of his profound regard for the place of the Bible in Christian belief and theology—and because he knew it so thoroughly. Those who doubted his devotion to the Bible needed only to read his comments in his article 'The Bible as a document of believing communities' (in H. D. Bietz (ed.), *The Bible as a Document of the University*, Chico, 1981, pp. 25–47): 'It is . . . of vital importance that the primary place in the preaching and therefore in the thinking and meditation of the community should be taken by careful and detailed interpretation of scripture, in which a genuine attempt is made to discover and interpret what it really means, as against our antecedent expectation of what it ought to mean . . . first place should be given to the search for the meaning of scripture itself; this is what the community needs, and wants, to hear.'

Barr's rejection of the notion of the total 'fallenness' of humankind is of a piece with his arguments in *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London, 1992), based upon the Read-Tuckwell Lectures in Bristol for 1990. Here the theological import of the opening chapters of Genesis is analysed acutely and in a revealing new way. Barr shows that the traditional description of Genesis 3 as 'The Fall', such that human nature was from then on totally marred and lost an immortality it had previously possessed, fails to grasp what is really going on in this chapter. Rather, the narrative relates how humanity might have become immortal but lost the chance of this, but it does not imply that humankind became totally corrupt. Incidentally, this illuminating study of this famous text in Genesis is a clear example of the principle of exegesis referred to in the preceding paragraph and upon which Barr never tired of insisting, namely, that it must be guided by an endeavour 'to discover and interpret what [the text] really means, as against our antecedent expectation of what it ought to mean'. This book is also not least among his writings that induce in the reader what in German is sometimes referred to as '*ein Ahaerlebnis*', where a new idea that one would never have had oneself immediately seems so obvious that one cannot understand how one had failed to see it. Often he simply applied common sense to scholarly problems that had become convoluted through a kind of over-sophistication—but common sense that was in fact far from common! The clarity of Barr's thinking is conveyed also by his writing: he wrote in simple, forth-

right English, and eschewed a high academic style in favour of absolute lucidity and direct communication with the reader: often his prose reads as though one were simply listening to him talking.

He retired from Vanderbilt in 1998 and he and Jane moved to California, close to their son Allan. He published two further books. The first of these was his longest book by far, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London, 1999), the product of various series of lectures and some shorter writings over many years, in which he analyses the tradition of biblical theology in the twentieth century, with detailed studies of famous works such as the Theologies of Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, but also of lesser known studies and more recent works such as that of Walter Brueggemann. The book is not itself a Biblical Theology; it is, rather, a study of the genre, which charts its development to date and evaluates how it might best develop further.

The second of these two final books was *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the end of a Millennium* (Oxford, 2000), based upon the Hensley Henson Lectures delivered at Oxford in May 1997. Though lacking the scope of *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Barr's formidable learning in the subject matter on which he writes and the incisiveness of his critique of the new trends under review are undiminished. The seven main chapters are loosely related, but two words predominate and form a broad framework for his reflections—'ideology', a word scarcely found in biblical studies until recently, but now a buzzword, and 'postmodernism', with its anti-Enlightenment stance and its 'hermeneutic of suspicion', which has gained a significant following among biblical scholars, most especially in the United States.

Barr himself provides a gloss on the subtitle of the book:

The end of a century is commonly supposed to have a certain character, best expressed in the French phrase *fin de siècle*: a certain sense of decay, degeneration, cynicism, loss of ideals perhaps. And if that takes place at the end of a century, what about the end of a millennium? It should, arithmetically, be even worse! Is that the case with biblical studies at the present time? (p. 14)

The book is predominantly a critique of recent trends which, if they do not merit the description 'cynical' or 'degenerative', Barr regards as a deep departure from the ideals of biblical research and learning in the past in favour of a 'pursuit of rapidly changing fashions, the dominance of theory over serious knowledge, the absence of connection with religious traditions, and the readiness at any time to overturn that upon which one stood in one's own learning only a few years before', all of which

‘produce a fevered atmosphere which is likely to do considerable damage’ (p. 156). He pertinently asks apropos the break with religious traditions ‘why should the Bible, once detached from its church connections . . . be so important for us to read at all?’ (p. 155).

His closing observation in the book is that ‘[t]oo much of the recent discussion has involved a fevered grasping at innovation and a willingness to make a quick abandonment of what earlier scholarship had achieved. The wise saying should be heeded: that revolution devours her children’ (p. 180).

In retirement he continued to teach courses in various places. He was an Academic Visitor in Glasgow University in 1999 when he delivered the Alexander Roberston Lectures, and in 2004 was Visiting Professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for several months. He and Jane continued their indefatigable travels, and spent a summer driving through Europe, exploring the ‘new’ Europe, the old Eastern bloc which had been inaccessible during the Communist years. Meanwhile he was beginning to develop some material for a projected book about prophecy in the Old Testament which sadly he was unable to complete. In 2005, while attending a meeting of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, he fell down a flight of stairs, sustaining serious head injuries, and though he slowly recovered most of his faculties he did not return to serious work again. By 2006 he was sufficiently recovered for a trip to Europe to be planned, but shortly before departure he had another fall and was again in hospital. There his condition declined, and he died on 14 October 2006. In his last days it was discovered that he was suffering from bone cancer. He had survived surgery for prostate cancer in 1994 and had had a pacemaker for some years, but this other illness had not been suspected. His funeral was held in California and his ashes were interred near Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, where in January 2007 there was a memorial service attended by Jane and members of the family, as well as many friends and colleagues from throughout the United Kingdom, the Continent of Europe, and from the USA.

Many of those who knew James Barr only from his more critical works were much surprised when they met him because of his welcoming and generous character. He could even seem rather shy on first acquaintance, but he was an approachable and kindly person. He was devoted to his family, to Jane, to his sons Allan and Stephen and his daughter Catherine, and latterly to his two grandsons and granddaughter. Despite his many honours he retained a simplicity and straightforwardness of manner that endeared him to family and friends alike. He could be and

often was the severest of critics where he saw wrong directions being flagged and misconceptions setting in, but he maintained an openness theologically which found expression not only in much of what he wrote but was matched by an openness to others as fellow-children of God. One discerns in his book *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* and, indeed, in his *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* an ultimate optimism about human nature which those who knew James Barr will recognise as entirely of a piece with his general character.

ERNEST NICHOLSON

Fellow of the Academy

JOHN BARTON

Fellow of the Academy

Note. We are indebted to the following for biographical and other information in writing this Memoir: Jane Barr, Allan Barr, Stephen Barr, Robin Barbour, Ronald Clements, David Clines, Adrian Curtis, John Emerton, Alan Jones, Wilfred Lambert, Douglas Knight, Mervyn Richardson, Edward Ullendorff, Hugh Williamson.