



ROBERT HENRY LIGHTFOOT, 1953

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1883-1953

**R**OBERT HENRY LIGHTFOOT came of Devonshire stock and was born, on 30 September 1883, into a clerical and academic environment. His grandfather, John Prideaux Lightfoot, had been a notable Oxford figure who held office as Rector of Exeter College for thirty-three years, while his father, Reginald Prideaux Lightfoot, was Archdeacon of Oakham and interested himself keenly in educational affairs. An uncle, Henry le Blanc Lightfoot, became bursar of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

R. H. Lightfoot passed from Summerfields, Oxford—always remembered with gratitude—into College at Eton, where his industry and good sense commended him to boys and masters alike. He was accustomed, in later years, to look back on his schooldays as a time of loneliness and even depression, but letters which belong to this period give every indication that, both at home and at school, he was fortunate in finding an abundance of sympathy and affectionate interest. He maintained a lifelong correspondence, reserved yet genial and amusing, with several of his Eton contemporaries, and his tutors were at pains to draw out the abilities which they detected in him. 'He is not at all like the common run of boys', it was said in one of his early reports, 'he cares nothing for their chief interests and takes an independent line. His character is unusually serious for his age, and he seems a born student and theologian.' The master who wrote these words was later to sum up Lightfoot's capabilities thus: 'I have rarely if ever seen a more thorough worker: in getting up a subject he seemed to leave no point to chance. He became a sound classical scholar, but I always thought that his real bent was for theology.' In accordance with general expectation he was, in his final year at Eton, well placed in the New-castle Select and won the Wilder divinity prize in a manner which the headmaster described as 'really brilliant'.

Proceeding onwards to Worcester College, Oxford, as an exhibitioner, Lightfoot found it hard to adjust himself to the larger freedoms of a university, and his performance in the classical schools was something of a disappointment, though he impressed W. H. Hadow, who declared: 'It seems to me likely that he may someday become a writer of real value and importance: he has ability, tenacity of purpose and an interest in

his work which I have never seen surpassed.' He was befriended also by C. F. Burney, of St. John's College, who urged him to stay up in order to read theology and prophesied for him a career of distinction. Thus encouraged, Lightfoot obtained a good first class in the School of Theology, besides winning the senior Greek Testament and the senior Septuagint prizes. He hoped for an academic post but, since nothing suitable offered itself, was ordained to serve a curacy at Haslemere where, rather to his surprise, he was successful in parish work and gained a certain repute as a preacher of freshness and originality. Nevertheless he felt the need of time for reading and research and gladly accepted an invitation to join the staff of Wells Theological College, first as chaplain and, two years later, as Vice-Principal.

At Wells Lightfoot took the greatest pleasure in the beauty of his surroundings and in the spirit of harmonious fellowship which characterized the college, while his carefully prepared lectures were acclaimed by the scholarly for their learning and by the simple for their concise lucidity. The outbreak of war, however, disrupted this agreeable period in his career. The Principal, R. G. Parsons, moved away to work in London and, long before he was formally appointed Principal in 1916, Lightfoot was shouldering the administrative burdens of maintaining the life of an institution which was falling into a state of inevitable decline. The college was formally closed at Easter 1917, and Lightfoot departed to become domestic chaplain to Bishop Talbot of Winchester. He found much to enjoy in the varied life of Farnham Castle and in the fair-minded versatility of the bishop and of Mrs. Talbot alike, so that it seemed in some ways an anticlimax to return to Wells when hostilities ended. The college reopened in February 1919, but from the start Lightfoot experienced a certain loneliness and was, perhaps unduly, aware of differences of opinion between himself and the trustees. Moreover time had brought its changes, and he found that he 'could not be quite loyal to tradition and wholeheartedly train men exactly as they were trained before the war'. He became anxious about his health in view of the strain which he felt between his desire to move and his eagerness to provide for the students who were filling the college once again and who responded immediately to the interest which the Principal took in their welfare. He therefore received with a sense of relief and gratitude two almost simultaneous offers of work in Oxford and decided to accept nomination by the Bishop of Lincoln to the Visitor's

Fellowship at Lincoln College, with which the chaplaincy was conjoined. It was made clear to Lightfoot that, though he would be welcomed as scholar and teacher, he was expected to concern himself largely with the pastoral care of the post-war generation of undergraduates, and the prospect of such a task in the friendly and sympathetic atmosphere which he felt the presence of W. H. Moberly to guarantee was most congenial. 'There is', he wrote to a friend, 'a real opportunity in the College at this moment for work which I might hope to be able to do, and I am very thankful.'

Two years of happy activity followed and it was only after much hesitation and debate that, in 1921, he accepted the post of Dean of Divinity at New College. He enjoyed to the full the loveliness of the place and the magnificence of its chapel services; on the other hand he came to consider that a large college must inevitably be somewhat impersonal, and, with his sensitivity and reserve, he was not the kind of person to feel at home in a common-room which at that time contained a patently anti-clerical element. Lightfoot nevertheless set about his duties with characteristic diligence and, realizing that he alone of the tutors normally had but a small number of pupils, held himself bound to undertake a full share of administrative tasks. As domestic bursar he was glad of the opportunities afforded to him of getting to know members of the college staff, but he treated the routine complaints about food and service with exaggerated seriousness and it was with a sense of relief that he eventually laid down what had become a burdensome office. He was thus left free to pursue the studies which interested him. Following Lord Acton's advice to the effect that the only way to succeed is by rigidly delimiting one's field, Lightfoot formed the set purpose of contracting his range and of devoting all his energies to a minute examination of the Gospels. To the vexation of his friends he hesitated to write anything, but he read patiently and systematically and with a growing appreciation of the work done by Wrede and Wellhausen and by their successors who interpreted the Gospels in terms of *Formgeschichte*.

Much as Lightfoot respected the achievements of such English scholars as C. H. Turner, F. C. Burkitt, and B. H. Streeter, he held that their approach to New Testament problems failed to allow adequately for new discoveries or to meet the religious needs of the day. Turner seemed to him to rely over-much on the Papias fragment quoted by Eusebius and to have

thus been misled into imagining that St. Peter dictated to a stupid but faithful 'interpreter' an eyewitness account of the ministry of Jesus that was reliable and exact even though incomplete, while Burkitt appeared similarly mistaken in thinking that St. Mark's Gospel provided material from which the journeyings of Jesus could be reconstructed and the various incidents assigned with fair accuracy to a chronological sequence. Streeter was thought to be too deeply concerned with textual questions and with propounding the irritating and unnecessary hypothesis of 'proto-Luke'. By contrast Dibelius, Bultmann, and others were, in Lightfoot's view, clearly proceeding along the right path to a fuller understanding of the methods of the Gospel-writers. The matter may be summed up in Lightfoot's own words:

Until recently, we have assumed that our task as students is to lay bare, as far as may be, the *written* sources of our Gospels; and this study has had the two-source theory (Mark+Q) as its chief and well-assured result. This conclusion is of course accepted and welcomed by writers of the *Formgeschichte* school; but they are not content to stop at it or at any merely literary results.

They remind us that the early church is by no means likely to have expressed itself at once in a literary way, and they believe, first, that in the earliest years memories and traditions of the words and deeds of Jesus were only handed on from mouth to mouth, and, secondly, that they were valued not so much (as we might have expected) in and for themselves as for their importance in solving problems connected with the life and needs of the young churches. These needs, they think, would be chiefly concerned with mission preaching, catechetical teaching, demonstration of the content and meaning of the Christian life, refutation of Jewish and other objections and, perhaps above all, worship. They believe, further, that these memories and traditions would circulate at first chiefly in two forms: on the one hand, that of little, separate stories and, on the other, that of sayings of the Lord, whether in isolation or in small collections. Both would gradually assume a more or less fixed shape, through constant repetition in the churches; and, whatever may be true about the sayings, the stories would tend to form themselves upon the model of similar stories about teachers and leaders in the Jewish or the Hellenistic world. And, finally, they suggest that many of these pre-literary traditions are still discernible in our written Gospels, especially St. Mark, and that to some extent they can be classified according to their type or form; whence the name of the new study.

Visits to Germany and personal contacts with German scholars served to confirm Lightfoot in his opinion that the clue to Gospel study lies in the realization that the books are made up of small

sections, joined together by similarity of theme rather than in historical order and reflecting not only the words and works of Jesus Christ but also, to some extent, the beliefs and aspirations of the early church. There was nothing particularly novel in applying this sort of criticism to St. John's Gospel and even to those of Matthew and Luke, but what Lightfoot insisted was that even in the apparently 'slight and simple Gospel of St. Mark' doctrinal influences had dictated the choice of incidents for record and their interpretation. He was, however, well aware that results obtained by the form-critical method were less assured and of a more subjective nature than the literary comparison of the synoptic Gospels nor did he forget that there is nothing talismanic about the word *Formgeschichte* and that the application of this method can by no means be guaranteed to produce an answer to every question.

When he was chosen as Bampton Lecturer for 1934 and thus found himself under compulsion to produce written work by a stated date, Lightfoot faced the challenge in a mood compounded of prophetic fervour and extreme diffidence. On the one hand he eagerly embraced the opportunity of declaring the value of an approach to Gospel studies which marked one step farther along the highway of truth; on the other hand he shrank from the attacks of the conservatives, the obscurantists, and the merely foolish, with which categories he was at times disposed to relate many of the Oxford theologians of his day. The composition of *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* was therefore a wearisome and anxious affair which he was prevented from abandoning only by the urgent solicitations and even the practical assistance of his friends. To his horror of inaccuracy was added a fear of being misunderstood and the conviction that it was impossible to compress all that ought to be said on the subject into the straitened compass of eight lectures. However their delivery aroused widespread interest which, in Lightfoot's opinion, more than compensated for occasional attacks. He claimed no speculative originality for his lectures: rather his aim was to extract the essential meaning of bulky, technical works and present it in a clear-cut and serviceable manner. Some critics were for this reason inclined to dismiss Lightfoot's effort in patronizing terms: 'the lectures are evidently intended for those who are beginning the study of the Gospels or who have lost touch with its modern developments'. But opinions such as this failed to take account of the nature of his achievement, which was to expound the *formgeschichtliche* method, carefully revised and

pruned of all luxuriance and excess, to the English-speaking world.

More serious, to Lightfoot's mind, were the objections of those who considered that he had gone too far in the direction of a flight from established, historical fact. 'It seems', he had declared at the end of his lectures, 'that the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us. For all the inestimable value of the Gospels, they yield us little more than a whisper of his voice; we trace in them but the outskirts of his ways.' And this conclusion appeared to some, particularly to those who failed to catch its echoes of the book of Job, as smacking of unnecessary scepticism. Yet Lightfoot drew no pleasure from a sceptical approach to things. He explained in the preface to *History and Interpretation in the Gospels* that he had taken as his motto some words of the puritan divine Isaac Pennington: 'All truth is a shadow except the last. But every truth is substance in its own place, even though it be but a shadow in another place. And the shadow is a true shadow, as the substance is a true substance.' Lightfoot, in fact, cast himself for the role of performing in New Testament studies, albeit on a much smaller scale, the same kind of critical service as had been achieved for Old Testament learning by S. R. Driver. In his writings as in his sermons he strove to avoid all unreality of thought or language. He professed himself to be easily puzzled by the complexity of events, but he had a horror of slick answers and empty catchwords, regarding it as the prime duty of a university teacher to display 'faithful adherence to fact'. The theologian whom he most respected was his friend W. R. Inge, though on occasion he might shake his head wistfully over some of the dean's more outspoken utterances. In Inge he detected not only massive learning, courage, and freshness of mind but also a mystical sense which answered to his own convictions. For Lightfoot never allowed the minutiae of criticism to make him forgetful of the realities of worship.

In 1933 Lightfoot was elected Dean Ireland Professor of Exegesis, an office which was at that time compatible with his tutorial fellowship, and thenceforward came to feel that his usefulness lay not so much in college affairs as in the task of fostering the study of theology in Oxford as a whole. In addition to his lectures, prepared as always with meticulous care and now delivered with increasing authority, he conducted small classes in Gospel criticism with great enjoyment though still with characteristic reluctance to dogmatize and with an exaggerated respect

for the views, however immature, of his pupils. He was regular in attendance at meetings of the Origen Society and of its counterpart for senior members, the Oxford Society of Historical Theology, which he served as secretary for twelve years. He felt a certain responsibility for the standard of the papers presented to this society, and anything which savoured of unchastened speculation, as well as any ill-considered interventions in the customary debate, filled him with mute but unmistakable distress.

In 1938 Lightfoot published his second work, *Locality and Doctrine in the Gospels*, which constitutes a kind of appendix to the Bampton Lectures and is concerned with the influence of doctrinal factors on geographical detail. In particular, the reasons are fully discussed for certain discrepancies in the Gospel narrative where one evangelist assigns occurrences in the life of Jesus to Galilee—Galilee of the Gentiles—while another places the same events in Jerusalem, the appropriate place for the culminating scenes of Messianic activity. For the working out of such ideas he was greatly indebted to the researches of Ernst Lohmeyer, but he adopted no suggestion which he did not carefully test and develop. Lightfoot was greatly encouraged about this time by the experience of spending a year as visiting professor at Bowdoin University, on the eastern seaboard of the United States. He felt at his ease in an atmosphere which seemed to him more appreciative and less critical than that to which he was accustomed at home, he found happiness in spontaneous and unaffected friendships, and was gratified by the interest taken in his lectures. Nor was he in the least put out by the discovery that one or two of his auditors were attracted less by the subject-matter of the courses than by the opportunity of hearing a classic example of the Oxford accent.

The disturbances of the wartime years naturally imposed something of a check upon Lightfoot's work when he was at the height of his powers; at the same time he was aware of a stimulus, even a vocation, to be more than ordinarily active in an effort to preserve the vigour of academic life and thought. In 1940 he became joint editor, with G. R. Driver, of the *Journal of Theological Studies*, and a few years later took on the responsibility alone. He set out to maintain in this publication the highest standards of austere scholarship, even if that aim meant the rejection of material which was perhaps interesting but betrayed a certain looseness of structure. Young theologians were encouraged to submit articles, while young and old alike could be



sure that every line which they wrote would be carefully scrutinized and, if necessary, emended in what Lightfoot called 'the direction of lucidity'. Amongst other valuable enterprises which have owed much to his support may be noted the Oxford *Lexicon of Patristic Greek* and the *Critical Greek New Testament*. He was also a diligent curator of the Bodleian Library and, as examining chaplain to successive archbishops of Canterbury, took a keen interest in the problems connected with the selection and training of ordinands, several of whom were fortunate enough to benefit not only from his advice but also from his timely and practical help.

For Lightfoot rejoiced in unobtrusive acts of generosity, manifested to a wide variety of persons, and the impression which he sometimes conveyed of aloofness was utterly at variance with his true nature. Unpunctuality, inconstancy, bad handwriting, slurred or over-rapid speech—such failings he regarded as the enemies of ordered life and barriers to harmony, but anyone who respected his conventions, and some, indeed, who did not, could rely on loyalty and gladly given friendship. In congenial society he showed himself both wise and witty. He had a quick eye for the foibles and follies of mankind and was, moreover, an excellent mimic, but his shrinking from indiscretion, as well as his genuine charity, checked him from gossip and led him to speak in terms of ironic understatement. Sometimes, however, his dislike of ecclesiastical flummery would draw him on to throw caution to the winds and exclaim, more in surprised sorrow than in anger, 'It is really *amazing*. He is no fool: how *can* he show such lack of *judgement*?'

In 1950 appeared Lightfoot's *The Gospel Message of St. Mark*. This work, based on a course of lectures given at the University College of South Wales, was to some extent repetitive of the Bampton Lectures. But there is also new and valuable material to be noted throughout and particularly in the chapters, based on articles by Jeremias and Lohmeyer, where the Cleansing of the Temple is discussed and interpreted. The book concludes with a spirited defence of Lightfoot's firmly held opinion that the shorter ending of St. Mark's Gospel is the genuine and original text and with a terse but effective apology for form-criticism. It is contended that this approach to the Gospels, with its recognition that they were composed as theological treatises rather than as 'plain biography', serves not to destroy but to edify and explain, even though 'there is bound to be some discomfort and uncertainty, especially for the older generations'. Even if, in

the course of the years, *Formgeschichte* comes to be dismissed as little more than an oddity in the chequered history of Gospel criticism, it is difficult to imagine that Lightfoot's meticulous accuracy, reverent learning, and selfless search for truth will not be long remembered for good or that the impress of his work upon subsequent scholarship will not be deep.

By the time that *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* was published, Lightfoot had resigned both from the Dean Ireland chair and from New College, though he was almost immediately elected to an Extraordinary Fellowship at Lincoln College to add to his Honorary Fellowship at Worcester College. He retired to a North Oxford flat where, quietly and independently, he could enjoy his pictures, his books, and a view across the Parks which never ceased to delight him. Physical weakness restricted activity, but he continued to concern himself in the liveliest manner with men and affairs, appearing to be as glad to coach undergraduates in New Testament Greek as to hear the latest details of some venture of high scholarship. Meanwhile his own commentary on St. John's Gospel was slowly taking shape. Less sure of his views about John than he had been of his opinions on Mark, he found it necessary to submit everything that he had written to an almost continuous process of revision, but, before his death on 24 November 1953, the work was nearly completed and, when it appears in published form, will probably go far to justify one critic's earlier encomium to the effect that 'no-one has done more than Dr. Lightfoot to help students to read the Gospels as they were read by those for whom they were composed'.

Lightfoot left clear instructions that his funeral was to take place in the simplest possible manner and in conditions of strict privacy. He thus displayed to the last his abhorrence of all fuss and ostentation as well, perhaps, as a failure to appreciate the affection in which he was widely held and the respect accorded to him both as a scholar and as a friend.

R. L. P. MILBURN