ROBERT HENRY CHARLES

1855–1931

THE external life of a scholar can usually be told in a few sentences, and it is true of the Venerable Archdeacon Charles, though, indeed, he saw many kinds of life in his time, and had many interests. He was a Northern Irishman from county Tyrone and remained a sturdy Protestant all his life, even when officiating in Westminster Abbey arrayed in the gorgeous cope that Canons of Westminster now wear on appropriate occasions. He finished his education, except in so far as he was educating himself in ever new fields all through his life, at Trinity College, Dublin, in the great days when Salmon was Provost, and his work has all the brilliance and logical distinction that that great school of exact learning stands for.

Robert Henry Charles was born in 1855, the son of D. H. Charles, M.D., J.P., and brother of Sir R. Havelock Charles; he was educated at Belfast, later at Trinity College, Dublin, where he took a brilliant degree. He was ordained in 1883 at the age of twenty-eight, and for six years held various curacies in London, both in the East End and the West End. He married in 1886 Miss M. L. Bence-Jones, who survives him: they had no family of their own, but their home was made bright and cheerful by a number of nieces, whom Dr. and Mrs. Charles brought up as their own children till they married. About 1890 Charles migrated to Oxford and was attached to Exeter College. Later on he became a Fellow of Merton. It was at Oxford he did most of his scholarly work, and he remained there till he was made a Canon of Westminster in 1913. In 1919 he became Archdeacon. He died early in 1931.

It was characteristic of Dr. Charles that he was always entirely absorbed in the piece of work upon which he was engaged. This singleness of aim gave force and vigour to his writing and, as a characteristic, was known to all his

friends. What is perhaps not so well known is that the great series of editions of Jewish Apocrypha which he edited between 1893, when he brought out his first translation of the Book of Enoch, and 1913, when he published his Commentary on Daniel, were designed as a preparation for his Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, which finally appeared in 1920. This Commentary is a most meritorious work, going elaborately into all the sources, textual and literary, and is remarkable for a theory of the composition of the book which regards the order of the final chapters as the work of a devoted but unintelligent pupil of the original writer.[1] But important as that Commentary is, it may safely be asserted that the preliminary studies were even more valuable. Their effect was to put before the English scholar, in a form not too technical or overburdened with linguistic details, the text and historical meaning of the Jewish Apocrypha, so that one can understand by their aid the hopes and aspirations and the view of the world which made the Jews of the first century A.D.—or most of them—believe that 'the Kingdom of God should immediately appear'.

Not that Charles neglected linguistic scholarship. Neither Latin, nor Greek, nor Hebrew, nor Aramaic, nor Armenian, came amiss to Charles—for Slavonic he trusted to the competent guidance of Morfill—but the special acquirement which he possessed was a thorough knowledge of classical Ethiopic. Owing to the course of Ecclesiastical History a number of works once cherished by early Christians fell under Church censure and survive no longer in Greek or Latin, but have been retained by the Abyssinians and so have been preserved to modern times. Among these is the Book of Enoch, perhaps the most important of non-canonical Jewish works. This writing was originally composed in Aramaic (or perhaps Hebrew) about 100 B.C., and was known to the Evangelist Matthew, if not to Christ

[1] See Charles's Paper, read March 10, 1915 (*Proc. Brit. Acad.* for 1915–16, pp. 37–55).

Himself. In a Greek translation it was an honoured book in the Church for two or three hundred years. Then its unauthenticity as a work of the Patriarch was recognized, and it fell out of favour, so that nothing was known of it for certain, save a stray quotation in the Epistle of Jude and some extracts from it made by a late Byzantine Chronicler. James Bruce brought back a pair of manuscripts from Abyssinia, but even then it was fifty years before it found an editor in Archbishop Laurence (1838). In Germany, the great Ethiopic scholar Dillmann did a good deal for the elucidation of the book, but little attention was paid to it in this country except by Oriental specialists. Then came in 1892 the sensational discovery at Akhmim of an ancient manuscript containing the first third of Enoch in Greek, and in the following year Charles brought out a translation of the whole from Dillmann's Ethiopic text.

Those who have the curiosity to look at old reviews of 1894 will see how fresh a path Charles had blazed out. Scholars began to realize, as they had never done before, that in the Book of Enoch was one of the sources of the New Testament, one of the *Books which influenced our Lord and His Apostles*, to borrow the title of a useful work by J. E. H. Thomson (1891). But the special value of Charles's *Enoch* was that he was not dependent upon German erudition. He had made himself master of Ethiopic and drew his conclusions direct from the ancient text that has come down to us.

This independence of standpoint had its weak side, as must later be pointed out, but it undoubtedly gave Charles's books an accent of authority and helped greatly in giving him a hearing. In rapid succession he brought out a series of editions of the then little-known Jewish Apocrypha, including Jubilees (like Enoch, from the Ethiopic), the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Assumption of Moses, the Ascension of Isaiah, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (1894–1912). All these were translated into English, most of them for the first time, from the most ancient surviving

texts. In the case of Jubilees and the Patriarchs he constructed revised texts from better manuscript authority, and in 1906 laid the learned world under a permanent obligation by editing the Ethiopic text of Enoch from all the best surviving manuscripts, twenty-three in number. Meanwhile he was a great contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Hastings's *Dictionary of the Bible*, &c.: mention should also be made of the articles 'Apocalyptic Literature', and especially that called 'Eschatology', in *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, which though highly compressed are complete short treatises on their respective subjects. This whole literature, apart from the original texts, is gathered up in the Oxford Edition of the *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols., 1913), of which Dr. Charles was both the general editor and the principal contributor.

Charles was by now the recognized authority upon Jewish Apocalyptic Literature. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1906, and in 1925 he was the first recipient of the British Academy Medal for Biblical Studies. He had become a D.Litt. of Oxford in 1907, and in 1913, as I have already mentioned, he was appointed Canon of Westminster. This honour was generally recognized at the time as a tribute to meritorious theological learning, independent of any ecclesiastical party, and its duties did not seriously interfere with the preparation of the Commentary on the Apocalypse, to which all his previous labours had been a conscious preparation.

The present writer is partly responsible for a happy delay in the work of the Commentary, by helping to persuade Dr. Charles to bring out an English translation of the Chronicle of John of Nikiu. This work, written originally in Greek, contains a very valuable and nearly contemporary account of the Arab conquest of Egypt, but it survives only in an Ethiopic translation of a lost Arabic translation of the original. It had been published by Zotenberg, but a careful and literal English edition was needed, and Charles had exactly the linguistic knowledge required. His excellent

edition of this work (1916) will help to keep his memory alive among Byzantine historians who care little for Jewish pseudepigrapha.

As I said above, Charles had become the authority *par excellence* in the department of theological thought and literature which he had made his own. He had made non-specialists feel its importance, as no British scholar had done since critical studies had come to maturity. He had attracted to himself a band of younger students who accepted for the most part his conclusions, and—it must be confessed—he was not very patient of adverse criticism. While working at a new subject there was a period when his mind was eagerly assimilative of new ideas, new views, new conclusions: then he attained conviction, and from that point it was difficult to move him.

Two stories may illustrate what has been said. In 1902 Charles brought out his translation and commentary on the Book of Jubilees, six years after he had published his recension of the text. He had begun the commentary when occupied with the text, but as he himself says in his Preface he 'felt that somehow he had failed to give a satisfactory interpretation'. He had started with the then traditional idea that the work was written from the point of view of a 'Pharisee' about A.D. 1. Historical difficulties presented themselves as he proceeded, but he had an ingenious answer to each as it appeared—he always was most ingenious—and six sheets (so he once told me) were actually passed for press and printed off. Yet he could not escape the feeling of effort and opposition. Then a fresh study of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs converted him to the view that the Book of Jubilees was really a century older than the date he had defended. He persuaded his publisher to let him start afresh, and he rewrote his commentary from his new point of view that Jubilees was written when a victorious nephew of Judas Maccabaeus was still on the throne, not yet in conflict with the religious leaders of Judaism. Now, he told me, all was easy; his ingenious

argumentation was not needed, all the details fell naturally into their place. Charles's new date was generally accepted: I have often thought of his description of his experiences in writing the two forms of his commentary as illuminatingly typical of the experience of a scholar working, in the one case on a wrong hypothesis, in the other on the right one.

The other story is concerned with the Slavonic Book of the Secrets of Enoch. When Charles was first occupied with the ancient Jewish Book of Enoch, the book quoted by Jude, he found that there existed a different 'Enoch' in Slavonic, and he got Professor W. R. Morfill, the well-known Slavonic scholar, to translate it into English. Charles saw at once that this was a different work altogether from the document preserved in Ethiopic, but he treated it as a Jewish composition (though in it the year was said to consist of $365\frac{1}{4}$ days, i.e. the Julian year), supposing that it was written in Greek by an Alexandrian Jew before A.D. 70. Charles's edition came out in 1896. In the following year M. R. James published a miscellaneous work called *Apocrypha Anecdota II.* In the Introduction to this collection (which included the famous Gnostic Hymn of Jesus in the Acts of John) the present Provost of Eton discusses the nature of a 'Chalkadry', i.e. the crocodile-headed companion of the sun according to Slavonic Enoch, illustrating his remarks by certain late Byzantine documents. Amongst other things he points out that 'every bird' in Slavonic Enoch xv. 1 must be a rendering of πᾶν ὄρνεον, i.e. 'every *cock*', and that the following verse gives the words of the song which the cocks are supposed to sing before sunrise.

It was a neat piece of exposition, but it was ignored by Charles, and in the 1913 collection of *Pseudepigrapha* (p. 437) no notice of it whatever is taken. This was particularly unfortunate, as what underlay Dr. James's criticism was a totally different theory as to the origin and nature of this so-called Jewish work. The sequel was that Mrs. Maunder, for many years an 'observer' at Greenwich, pronounced

that the astronomy of Slavonic Enoch was not Alexandrian but Byzantine, and the point was very forcibly demonstrated in convincing detail by Dr. J. K. Fotheringham in the *Journal of Theological Studies* (xxiii, pp. 49–56). In other words, 'Slavonic Enoch' is not Jewish, but a Christian work of the seventh century A.D.

It certainly requires a very peculiar balance of mind to deal satisfactorily with the Apocalyptic literature in which the Jews expressed their national and religious hopes and fears. 'The persistence of this conception (of Sheol) . . . side by side with the monotheistic conception . . . is, for the western mind, hard to understand, the conceptions being mutually exclusive' (*Eschatology*, §11). So wrote Charles, and later on (§48) he says, 'Either, then, the expression is used loosely and vaguely, or—and the present writer inclines to this view—Isaiah lxvi. 22 is a later intrusion'. These are very characteristic sentences, and exhibit very well Dr. Charles's habit of mind. If he came to have any respect for an ancient author he was unwilling to believe that such a person could have entertained conceptions which to Charles's trained and logical western mind were 'mutually exclusive', and his favourite explanation was to postulate interpolations and a multiplicity of sources, each of which may be supposed to have been written from a single and consistent point of view. The many 'sources' which Charles found in the Apocalypse of Baruch, many of the 'interpolations' in the Twelve Patriarchs, and above all the theory that the last chapters of the Johannine Apocalypse had been re-edited by a well-meaning but stupid disciple, were examples of the efforts made by him to apply strict logic to works whose writers were governed rather by hope and enthusiasm than by reason and consistency.

But however much later scholars may criticize Charles's work in details, and even in methods, there is no doubt of the stimulus he gave to the study of the Jewish Apocalypses. This aspect of his activities is emphasized by Canon G. H.

Box, who worked with Charles in the preparation of the Oxford *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*. Canon Box in a letter to me about Charles and his work went on to illustrate what he called Dr. Charles's 'capacity to forget'. He mentions how he and Dr. Charles were fellow examiners for a Thesis for a London University Doctorate, how helpful and interested Charles had been, how many valuable suggestions he made, including the form of the title—and then, four years later, Box found that Dr. Charles had altogether forgotten about the thesis and its really quite distinguished author!

'This,' says Canon Box, 'was I believe merely a defect of what was perhaps his supreme quality—his power of complete absorption in the subject upon which he was immediately engaged. This gave an intensity and completeness to his work which were truly remarkable, but the flame consumed as well as illuminated: hence the remarkable and apparently inconsistent divagations.'

Dr. Box goes on to say:

'One remark I should like to make and this has reference to Dr. Charles's sermons. I had an opportunity of listening to one of these in the Abbey on the afternoon of Sunday, August 23, 1914. He had done me the honour of asking me to preach in the Abbey at the morning service on that day and so I had an opportunity of seeing him in the beautiful surroundings of his home in the Little Cloisters. The sermon to which I listened in the afternoon was characteristic: it was a massive disquisition on a point of divinity. Dr. Charles's sermons were all of this character, thoughtful, scholarly and elaborate. I was struck by the fact that a good congregation was present to listen. A friend of mine told me that he regularly attended to hear these discourses when Dr. Charles was in residence. Doubtless there were many other regular attendants on these occasions, and this suggests that there is room in the metropolis for some centre where a sermon of a university type could be preached by distinguished scholars.

'In this respect, as in others, Dr. Charles played the part of a pioneer. Though his death marks a great loss to Biblical study, yet at least we have the consolation of knowing that he had rounded off his great work by splendid achievement.'

Thus far Canon Box, who expresses the feelings of those

who were not only workers in the same field as Dr. Charles, but were actual colleagues and collaborators with him. There was something very lovable about the man as well as the scholar, and in this place it is not inappropriate to remember that Charles's last act, when during his last illness he was almost too feeble to hold a pen, was to sign a Recommendation Paper for a Fellow of the British Academy whose election took place only after Charles had already passed away.

Since these lines were in print I received a copy of a study of one of the later Christian Apocalypses by an Italian scholar, the Canon G. Ricciotti. In his Preface he had occasion to mention Charles, and calls him *il grande e benemerito editore di Apocrifi*. Don Ricciotti has used exactly the right word: in Robert Henry Charles we recognize the great and well-deserving editor of Jewish Apocrypha, whose works have not only instructed his own countrymen, but also have lightened the labours of scholars all over the civilized world.

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