ERNEST WILSON NICHOLSON

Ernest Wilson Nicholson
1938–2013

Ernest Nicholson was a distinguished biblical scholar who specialized in the study of the Pentateuch, the 'books of Moses' in the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). He also made significant contributions to the study of biblical and cognate languages, to biblical theology and to the understanding of medieval Jewish exegesis of the Bible. His administrative and pastoral skills were apparent in his work as a priest in the Church of England, especially as Dean of Pembroke College, Cambridge, and in his tenure of the Provostship of Oriel College, Oxford, where he also succeeded spectacularly in fundraising. He is remembered in all the places where he worked for his warm and compassionate personality, his humour and his transparently genuine concern for all with whom his work brought him into contact.

Ernest Wilson Nicholson was born on 26 September 1938 in Portadown, Co. Armagh, Northern Ireland, to Ernest Tedford Nicholson and Veronica Muriel Nicholson. He was the youngest child of three, his brother Norman and sister Thelma being respectively six and four years older than he. His father worked in a bakery, but (although there was no conscription in Northern Ireland) he signed up to serve in the Second World War, and so was at home very little during Ernest's early years. He recalled his father as very kind, but deeply affected by his work in bomb disposal, where he lost many comrades: nowadays we should probably speak of post-traumatic stress disorder. He was devoted to both his parents, and his first book was dedicated to the memory of his mother 'who first read to me the words of the Bible and who herself lived in its light and died in its hope'. Young Ernest did not initially succeed very well

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at school, famously failing 'the qualifying', as the 11+ examination was known in Northern Ireland. In later years this failure gave him immense sympathy with struggling students, and rather than resenting it he turned it into a trump card when addressing those who might be doubtful of their ability to succeed in academe or, indeed, in life. The immediate consequence was that he stayed at primary school for an additional year and then, in 1951, went to the local Technical College to study in the trades department, acquiring some useful practical skills but not being stimulated much intellectually.

That he was nevertheless set on the path to academic success Nicholson always attributed to the local Church of Ireland curate, the Revd John Ryan, who got to know him through the Boys' Brigade and saw the academic potential in him. (Ryan he recalled as the first person he ever heard playing classical music, which was to be a lifelong pleasure from then on—he became a talented pianist.[1]) Ryan encouraged him to transfer to the grammar school after he had passed the Junior Certificate in 1953. There he found, naturally, that he was behind the other pupils, for example in French and Mathematics, and he had to work hard to catch up. Some of the teachers recognised his potential, and one history teacher in particular lent him books and showed him how to use a library; and by the time he took the Senior Examination (akin to 'A' Level) he was deputy head boy, got a prize for the best result in History and had good results also in English Literature, French and Geography. Thereupon he gained a scholarship (fees plus an allowance) to Trinity College Dublin (TCD).

Things were not simple even then. To get the scholarship, he had had to learn Latin, which he studied with a teacher from Lisburn. He had additional help from Hazel Jackson, a teenage friend who was to study at Queen's University Belfast: they married in 1962, the beginning of a long, happy partnership that lasted until Nicholson's death. He also had to acquire more advanced French, for lessons in which his father paid 2s. 6d. per hour. And in general he was aware of being behind his contemporaries. But he had a clear aptitude for languages; and having decided to study a subject which no one would have taken at school anyway, so that he would be on a par with others, he opted for Hebrew and Semitic Languages, at that time supervised in TCD by Professor Jacob (Jack) Weingreen, the author of a standard Hebrew grammar still in use in many universities, and a brilliant teacher.

[1] Ryan subsequently had a parish in Liverpool, where he was so popular that he appeared on the BBC series *This is Your Life*: Nicholson contributed to the script. He died in Enniskillen.

In the four years Nicholson spent as a student at TCD he studied not only Biblical Hebrew but also Mishnaic and Medieval Hebrew (with Joshua Baker, a Dublin barrister, with whom he would later work on the commentaries of David Kimchi), and Aramaic (especially the Targums) and Syriac (especially the Gospels). In addition he took two years of Arabic and biblical archaeology. (Later, in Glasgow, he would add Akkadian.) This wide grasp of Semitic languages came into its own when he worked on the *Revised English Bible*, and had to judge proposals for previously unsuspected words in Hebrew made on the basis of cognate languages. For the examination known as the 'Little-Go' he took other subjects too, such as Church History and Hellenistic Greek. He became a Foundation Scholar, which gave him free rooms and 'commons' (meals at the common table), plus an annual grant, and these privileges continued even after he moved to Glasgow. In the 'moderatorship' (i.e. BA) he took a First; and from this point on his future academic career began to take shape.

In 1959 D. Winton Thomas interviewed him in Cambridge and offered him a place for the Cambridge Part III in Theology—what is now the M.Phil. His Cambridge career was, however, destined to be delayed, as the Northern Ireland Office refused to support him, so that he could not afford to take up the offer. Weingreen discussed his future with John Mauchline in Glasgow, and he was encouraged to apply for a scholarship there, which he won. His supervisor was C. J. Mullo Weir, an eccentric but very learned figure who taught him Akkadian; but more significant was his contact with William McKane, later professor in St Andrews, who became a kind of informal supervisor as well as a close friend. In 1962, while still engaged in his doctoral work, he took up the position of Lecturer back at TCD, a position he was to hold for five years. During that time he travelled a good deal between Dublin and Glasgow, for the library holdings in Glasgow, especially in the all-important German scholarship on the Old Testament, were greatly superior to those in TCD. He submitted his doctoral thesis in 1964: entitled 'Literary and Historical Problems in the Book of Deuteronomy', it became his first book, *Deuteronomy and Tradition* (Oxford), published in 1967. It immediately established itself as the standard work on Deuteronomy, which all students of the Old Testament needed to read if they were to become familiar with the state of research, and it also put forward Nicholson's own theory about Deuteronomy as the product of prophetic circles in the northern kingdom of Israel, in contradistinction to Gerhard von Rad's idea that it was produced by Levites. Deuteronomy, and other Old Testament

literature influenced by it, remained a central interest: his next book, *Preaching to the Exiles: a Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah* (Oxford, 1970), investigated 'deuteronomistic' material in the book of Jeremiah, and he returned to Deuteronomy for his last book, *Deuteronomy and the Judaean Diaspora* (Oxford, 2014).

Cambridge finally claimed Nicholson in 1967, when he went to University (now Wolfson) College as a Leverhulme Visiting Research Fellow, but was soon appointed as Lecturer in the Divinity Faculty. This was the beginning of a golden age for Old Testament studies in Cambridge. John Emerton from Oxford took up the Regius Chair of Hebrew in 1968 and, at the same time as Nicholson, Ronald E. Clements was also appointed to a Lectureship in Divinity. The three soon established an amicable relationship, which included also the more senior Erwin Rosenthal (1904–91), who taught Semitic Languages. Nicholson lectured on the historical background to the Bible, Clements on the prophets; both gave regular supervisions to undergraduates on the whole sweep of the Old Testament, and they regularly discussed current developments in the discipline, finding a discussion partner each had somewhat lacked before. They shared an office in the Department of Physical Sciences!

Nicholson had long considered a possible vocation to Anglican orders, and after some training at Westcott House in Cambridge he was ordained in Ely Cathedral in 1969, after which he moved to Pembroke College as Chaplain, going on to become Dean of Chapel in 1973. Pembroke offered much scope for his pastoral and administrative energies: a life of research and teaching alone was not enough. At the same time he was stretched very tight, with Pembroke House, Pembroke's London 'settlement' (social action centre) off the Old Kent Road in Walworth to engage with, as well as the many calls on his time in college from students, Fellows and staff, and from the substantial number of college livings for which he had to be involved in selection committees. These were busy but very productive years on all fronts.

During his Cambridge years he published *Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition* (Oxford, 1973) in the series Growing Points in Theology, and also a volume on which he had worked in Dublin with Joshua Baker, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimchi on Psalms CXX–CL* (Cambridge, 1973). In 1970 he was invited by Professor W. D. McHardy to join the panel that was revising the *New English Bible* (NEB). Much of the work consisted of revisiting the many places where the editor, G. R. Driver, had hypothesized the existence of an otherwise unknown Hebrew word on the basis of cognates in other Semitic languages, rather than believing that the

Hebrew text should be emended or, indeed, that it made good sense given the traditionally accepted sense of the word in question. Most scholars regarded the presence of such 'Driverisms', as they were disparagingly known, as a distorting factor that rendered the NEB misleading in many places. The opportunity was also being taken to improve the translation in other ways, eventually resulting in the *Revised English Bible* of 1989. (Unfortunately, this version has not been widely adopted, despite its fairly manifest superiority to the *New Revised Standard Version*, which has carried all before it.) Nicholson consulted Driver's papers in the University Library in Cambridge to trace the origin of various Driverisms, and put in many hours of work on this project, producing a number of working papers, two of which were published.[2] During the same period he became very interested in the covenant traditions in the Old Testament and published articles on this:[3] these would later be incorporated in substance into his book *God and His People*. While in Cambridge he also contributed to the Cambridge Commentary on the New English Bible: *Jeremiah* (two volumes; Cambridge, 1973 and 1975). In his final year at Cambridge the University awarded him the degree of Doctor of Divinity.

Cambridge was succeeded by Oxford in April 1979, when at the age of 40 he became Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Oxford Theology Faculty, and a Professorial Fellow of Oriel College. (TCD elected him as an Honorary Fellow on his taking up the chair.) He quickly became as popular a lecturer in Oxford as he had been in Cambridge and Dublin, attracting large numbers to his lectures and making even Hebrew text classes full of humour, always conveying a sense that he was a fellow-learner with the students rather than speaking from on high. He also became very active in the corporate life of the College, much more than is commonly the case with professors in Oxford, and the College responded with affection and, in due course, made him its Provost. His years in the Oriel chair also saw him deeply involved in the affairs of the Theology Faculty, which he chaired for two years. At this time, too, he

[2] E. W. Nicholson, 'Blood-spattered altars?', *Vetus Testamentum*, 27 (1977), 113–17; E. W. Nicholson, 'The problem of הבא', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 89 (1977), 259–66.

[3] E. W. Nicholson, 'The covenant ritual in Exodus XXIV 3-8', *Vetus Testamentum*, 32 (1982), 74–86; E. W. Nicholson, 'Covenant in a century of study since Wellhausen', in A. S. van der Woude (ed.), *Crises and Perspectives* (Oudtestamentische Studiën, 24, 1986), pp. 54–69; E. W. Nicholson, 'Deuteronomy's vision of Israel', in D. Garrone and F. Israel (eds.), *Storia e Tradizioni di Israele: Scritti in onore di J. Alberto Soggin* (Brescia, 1991), pp. 191–203.

started to get involved in fund-raising, and notably secured funding towards his own chair from the Kirby Laing Foundation, as a result of which it was possible to refill it very soon after he resigned. Fund-raising would take more and more of his time in the years to come.

The time as Oriel Professor saw one major publication—a very substantial one: *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1986). This provided a complete survey of the covenant theme in the Old Testament as studied in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, like the earlier *Deuteronomy and Tradition*, it became definitive. Nicholson's knowledge of the history of scholarship impressed all readers, and his familiarity with the critical literature in German was much commented on, by German as well as anglophone scholars. He had always been hospitable to visiting scholars from abroad, and at Oriel he entertained a number of well-known Old Testament scholars and invited them to read papers to the Old Testament seminar, founded by James Barr, which he chaired once a fortnight. These included distinguished German scholars such as Otto Kaiser from Marburg, who held him in high esteem and who had said of *Preaching to the Exiles* 'After Nicholson's monograph, there is no going back.' In 1988 he was President of the Society for Old Testament Study, and invited Rudolf Smend of Göttingen as the visiting speaker, the beginning of a long association. Further engagement with German scholarship can be seen in his Preface to a translation of Hermann Gunkel's classic *Genesis*.[4] At various points during his years as professor he held Visiting Professorships in the USA, Canada and Australia.

On the retirement of Sir Zelman Cowen as Provost of Oriel the College identified two internal candidates for the Provostship, and Nicholson won the election, being installed by Her Majesty The Queen, the Visitor of Oriel, in 1990—a post in which he would remain for thirteen years. He was the College's fiftieth Provost. Cowen had inherited a College that was in many ways seriously run down, with buildings falling into disrepair and a much less than secure financial base. He had contributed hugely to remedying this situation, but much remained to do, and Nicholson saw his own task as continuous with that of his predecessor, so that the Cowen and Nicholson years can be seen as a unity from this point of view. One crucial initiative involved the redevelopment of the old real tennis court,

[4] See E. W. Nicholson, 'Hermann Gunkel as a pioneer of Modern Old Testament Study', in H. Gunkel, *Genesis Translated and Interpreted*, tr. M. E. Biddle (Macon, GA: 1997), Foreword, pp. 3–9.

in a building adjoining the main College building, to create a fourth quadrangle, with a lecture room, seminar rooms and attractive living accommodation. This was begun under Cowen but completed under Nicholson, with generous benefactions from Sir Philip and Lady Harris, the Leopold Muller Foundation, Countess Barbara DeBrye and the Clothier family: the lecture room is named the Harris Lecture Room, in memory of Sir Philip Harris's father. (Harris also contributed to the refurbishment of the hall.) But there were plenty of other problems to be fixed: as Nicholson commented to a potential benefactor, 'Our venerable buildings are beautiful and redolent with history, but also apt to hatch problems and throw them at us when least convenient.' Such problems included worn-out roofs, damp in the library and deteriorating conditions in the room housing the college archive, and Nicholson applied himself to raising funds to deal with all this. He got to know Mr Lee Seng Tee of the Lee group of companies in Singapore, who in 1995 made a personal gift to maintain the library building. He subsequently introduced Mr Lee to the British Academy and was the medium for his two substantial subsequent donations to the Academy. Such fund-raising involved arduous and time-consuming travel for Ernest and Hazel Nicholson, greatly helped by the generous assistance of an old Oriel member, Peter Collett, who played a very significant role in approaching fellow Orielenses, though not only them.

There were also improvements to the College that were not simply repairs, but enhancements. The space behind the chapel organ, long hallowed as John Henry Newman's oratory, was opened up, with the help of a benefaction from Lady Norma Dalrymple-Champneys and gifts from Valerie Eliot (widow of T. S. Eliot) and Vivien Greene (widow of Graham Greene). A stained-glass window commemorating Newman was installed and dedicated by the Bishop of Oxford in 2002. Another Orielensis and major benefactor, George Moody, commissioned a portrait of Her Majesty the Queen, which now hangs in the College Hall—specially dear to Nicholson, a devoted monarchist who had made the journey to London from Northern Ireland in 1953 to witness the coronation. And thanks to a generous gift in 2000 by James Mellon, likewise an Orielensis, a new building was acquired and converted to house the College's growing number of graduate students—the James Mellon Hall in the Cowley Road, the building being a former convent.

Further fund-raising was needed to help endow Tutorial Fellowships, a concern already in Sir Zelman Cowen's day, and a wide range of benefactors was approached, with appeals launched in such places as the

Tower of London, the Palace of Westminster, Kensington Palace, Gray's Inn, the residence of the French Ambassador, the German Embassy, the Royal Geographical Society, the Royal Society of Medicine and the Bank of England. Junior Research Fellowships and Visiting Fellowships were also successfully funded. This is the kind of work that goes on in all colleges and universities, and adds to the strains on those who head them. It soon became apparent that Nicholson had a knack for approaching potential benefactors, and he left the college in a far better state than he had found it.

From 1993 to 2003 he was a Pro-Vice-Chancellor, which required (among other things) chairing Boards of Electors for chairs in a whole range of subjects. He also chaired the Student Health Committee, which involved him in a highly sensitive case when a student in one of the Colleges committed suicide and her family were inclined to believe that she had not been adequately supported by her College or the University. It fell to Nicholson as chair to deal with this very painful and sensitive matter, which he did with great tact and sympathy, as well as speaking to the press, who felt they had Oxford on the run.

In the midst of all this activity, alongside the daily tasks of being an Oxford Head of House, he still published. Articles continued to appear, but his major work while Provost was *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: the Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford, 1998), another magisterial survey of the history of scholarship, this time on the Pentateuch as studied throughout the twentieth century. Work on this book involved rising early to read detailed works in German before the normal work of the day began, and reading and writing late at night and at weekends. It is a major achievement. It had been preceded by an article in the *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon* on 'Pentateuchforschung'.[5] These works confirmed his status as one of Britain's leading Old Testament scholars, already signalled in his election in 1987 as a Fellow of the British Academy, while he was still in the Oriel chair. He remained active in the Academy until shortly before his death, serving as a member of the Council and as Chair of the Theology and Religious Studies Section. In 2009 the Academy awarded him the Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies.

Nicholson retired as Provost of Oriel in 2003 but stayed in Oxford. In the year he retired he was presented with a Festschrift by former students

[5] E. W. Nicholson, 'Pentateuch, Pentateuchforschung', *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon: Internationale theologische Enzyklopädie iii* (Göttingen, 1992), cols. 1115–20.

and colleagues to mark his sixty-fifth birthday;[6] and he published a book he had edited, *A Century of Theological and Religious Studies in Britain* (London, 2003), to mark the centenary of the Academy, with a number of distinguished contributors, mostly Fellows of the Academy. But he also returned to the study of Deuteronomy, where his academic career had begun, publishing articles that significantly modified his earlier views. These came together to form his last book, published a few weeks after his death, *Deuteronomy and the Judaean Diaspora* (Oxford, 2014). He also continued to be an active participant in the life of Oriel College, which he had come to love, and (though already dying) was able to welcome his successor-but-one as Provost, Moira Wallace, when she arrived in 2013. During these final years he also worked on a history of the College (edited by Dr Jeremy Catto), which was his idea, contributing two chapters and living to see the volume published.[7] In his retirement he was elected as an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2010. He also acted as an adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury on the system of Lambeth diplomas and degrees.

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Ernest Nicholson's scholarship was characterised by good judgement, thorough attention to the detail of the biblical text and a fine grasp of philological and linguistic dimensions.[8] He worked within the traditions of critical biblical scholarship, with its concern for the origin and development of the biblical books and the traditions lying behind them, and did not venture into recent 'literary' approaches, or so-called synchronic interpretations of the text just as it is. On the Pentateuch, to which most of his books and papers were related, he accepted the general outline of the late nineteenth-century Graf–Wellhausen hypothesis, according to which the Pentateuch was the result of the weaving together of four originally distinct documents. These can be recognised through distinctive stylistic features and divergent theological themes, and often there are variant versions of the same incident that seem to come from different hands. Thus in the Flood Narrative (Genesis 6–9) we seem to have two separate and incompatible stories which have been fused together by an

[6] A. D. H. Mayes and R. B. Salters (eds.), *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E. W. Nicholson* (Oxford, 2003).

[7] J. Catto (ed.) *Oriel College: a History* (Oxford, 2013).

[8] See the careful and positive evaluation by J. A. Emerton, 'Introduction: Ernest Nicholson's contribution to Old Testament studies', in Mayes and Salters, *Covenant as Context*, pp. xvii–xl.

editor: the result is the fuzziness in the narrative that all careful readers notice, making it unclear how long the Flood is supposed to have lasted and how many animals entered the ark. The four sources are normally referred to nowadays as J, E, D and P, and much attention has been (and still is) paid to trying to arrive at both relative and absolute dates for them.

In German scholarship in the mid-twentieth century this hypothesis was generally regarded as incontrovertible, though all kinds of minor adjustments were made to it. J and E, which contain most of the memorable narratives in the Pentateuch, were regarded as deriving from the time before the Jewish Exile—perhaps from the ninth or eighth centuries BCE—but P, which contains most of the legislation running from the middle of Exodus right through Leviticus and on into Numbers, was seen as post-exilic. It was to be understood, according to Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), not as the legislative basis for ancient Israel (Israel in the time of the kings) but as the constitution of Judaism, considered as a development of the period when Israel existed under Persian rule and was more of a religious community than a nation. But, while accepting this overall picture, many German scholars began to think that it might be possible to get back to the earlier traditions that (as even Wellhausen had conceded) probably lay behind the two pre-exilic sources. The same was true of the book of Deuteronomy, which constitutes the so-called D source. Its date had been the linchpin for dating the other sources ever since the work of W. M. L. de Wette (1780–1849) in his doctoral dissertation of 1805, who argued that it was the book found in the Temple in the reign of King Josiah of Judah in 621 BCE, and which formed the basis for the religious reformation carried out by Josiah according to 2 Kings 22–3. De Wette had tended to think that it was composed specially to be 'found' (a 'pious fraud') and reflected the religious situation in the seventh century; but it had begun to be suggested that this was the end of a long period of transmission and elaboration, rather than the work of a single moment.

Such interests in the backstory of the Pentateuchal documents were in the air when Ernest Nicholson began work on his doctoral dissertation in the 1960s, and he was influenced especially by the writings of Martin Noth (1902–68) and Gerhard von Rad (1901–71). His dissertation was on Deuteronomy, and in the resulting monograph, *Deuteronomy and Tradition*, he set out to probe what might lie behind Deuteronomy. He fully accepted the de Wette hypothesis, but argued that the writers who had given Deuteronomy its present shape had worked with earlier material that had originated in the northern kingdom of Israel rather than in Judah, and had been brought down to Judah when the northern kingdom

fell in 721 BCE. Its original authors had been prophets, rather than Levites, as von Rad had suggested—prophets akin to Elijah and Elisha, who preserved old traditions of the exclusive worship of the God Yahweh and would have no truck with 'pagan' religious cults. These old traditions had passed down the generations and had been part of the belief of the exiles from the north who fled to Judah, and those around Josiah had formulated them into the book of Deuteronomy, or rather its essential core, chapters 12–26, sometimes described as *Urdeuteronomium*. Thus in reading Deuteronomy we are not dealing with 'an ad hoc literary and theological creation of the seventh century BCE. Rather we must see the book as the final product and expression of a long history involving the transmission and constant adaptation of the old traditions of early Israel upon which it is based.'[9] Later, Nicholson would come to question some of this theory, especially once the antiquity of Israelite traditions came under fire, and the theory of the old tribal 'amphictyony' of early Israel began to be doubted; but at the time it proved very widely influential, and established him not only as an original and creative Old Testament scholar, but also as a sound and reliable guide to what was happening in German scholarship—much needed in an environment where few students of biblical studies could read German with any fluency. Because of his detailed knowledge of what was happening in the German-speaking world, German scholars immediately came to respect Nicholson as a British scholar with whom they could correspond and to whose work they must attend.

His next book, *Preaching to the Exiles*, similarly applied German-style 'traditio-historical criticism' to the book of Jeremiah. All readers of Jeremiah notice that some passages are in prose and some in verse, and it is not unusual to suggest that the verse represents the original utterances of the prophet, the prose later additions by the scribes who were responsible for the finished form of the book—perhaps indeed one particular scribe, Baruch, whom we know was Jeremiah's secretary (see Jeremiah 36). But Nicholson noticed that the prose material is itself of two kinds. The narratives about the prophet are in a style indistinguishable from that of the books of Kings, which belong to what Martin Noth had described as the Deuteronomistic History because it applied the standards of Deuteronomy (especially exclusivity of worship) to the history of Israel, beginning with Moses. But there are also prose 'sermons' placed in the mouth of Jeremiah, and these too are deuteronomistic in character.

[9] Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition*, p. 121.

Perhaps, Nicholson suggested, they arose not in the mind of Baruch but in the mouths of deuteronomistically informed preachers in the Jewish community in exile in Babylonia, after Jerusalem fell in 598 BCE. Gerhard von Rad had argued that some of the speeches in the books of Chronicles were in origin sermons, delivered by Levites; Nicholson proposed that the 'sermons' in Jeremiah went back rather earlier, and had been heard by the community in Babylonia long before the work of the Chronicler. The sermons were the work of 'people who addressed themselves to a listening audience, more specifically, to gatherings of those in exile for worship and instruction, gatherings which probably constituted the beginnings of what eventually developed into the institution of the synagogue'.[10] Thus the book of Jeremiah was not simply a version, however worked over, of the teaching of Jeremiah, but an anthology of preaching in the years after Jeremiah's own demise, which demonstrated just how far the religious ideas of Deuteronomy had become dominant among the leaders of the exiled Judaeans. Sometimes there was a core saying or short oracle of Jeremiah's at the heart of one of the sermons, but in their present form they were the work of exilic preachers.

In *Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition* Nicholson once again explored tradition history, examining the theory of Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad that the stories about the exodus from Egypt and about Israel at Mount Sinai had originally (i.e. in the traditions underlying J and E) been unconnected. The Pentateuchal narrators had joined them together so that the experience of leaving Egypt and the experience of meeting God and receiving the law from him at Sinai now appeared to have been shared by the ancestors of all who would later count themselves as Israelites. But in historical reality these events were experienced by two quite distinct groups of people. When the Ten Commandments begin by addressing Israel and declaring 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt', this represents a marriage of two originally separate traditions, exodus and lawgiving. Nicholson carefully set out the arguments for this separation, but argued that they did not stand up. In a climate dominated by the work of these two German scholars, this was an original move, and it meant that it became possible to maintain a somewhat more traditional picture of early Israel. Nicholson's picture was not conservative in any fundamentalist sense, but it allowed for more historical tradition underpinning the present texts than Noth and von Rad were prepared to accept.

[10] Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles*, p. 137.

These first three books set the tone for Nicholson's writing throughout his scholarly career, with its careful engagement with the best current scholarship, especially in Germany, its exact attention to the biblical text and its willingness to test new theories. He became the leading anglophone practitioner of tradition history in Old Testament studies, but never following uncritically where German scholarship led: he remained his own man.

The other two books from his years in Cambridge were very different in character. The two-volume commentary on Jeremiah was a semi-popular work, though informed by *Preaching to the Exiles*, and has survived as one of the most useful commentaries on the book for those without Hebrew. But *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimchi on Psalms CXX–CCL* is another matter altogether. On the one hand, it displayed, as no other book does, Nicholson's erudition in medieval Hebrew and his understanding of rabbinic tradition. This, like his knowledge of other Semitic languages, was never on display, yet underlay a great deal of his scholarship. (Once during a vacancy in the Lectureship in Rabbinics in Cambridge he helped the Oriental Faculty out by delivering a lecture series on rabbinic commentaries on the Bible.) On the other hand, the book cost him a great deal of work, because he had to incorporate in it the comments of Joshua Baker, with whom he had worked on it back in Dublin, which were in a cardboard box he gave Nicholson in 1964–5. Earlier drafts needed considerable updating. The project haunted him during his Cambridge years.

The two books published during his Oxford career are in clear succession with the earlier ones but are more far-ranging, the work of a mature and magisterial scholar. During the work for *Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition* Nicholson had become interested in the antiquity of the covenant idea. As the Old Testament stands, it is a unifying theme, and claims to have been present from the beginnings of the nation under Moses; indeed, there are earlier covenants with Abraham and even Noah. But Nicholson suspected the theme was sometimes a literary invention by later editors. Indeed, he showed that the meal which the elders share on Mount Sinai in the presence of God (Exodus 24) is not, in the oldest strata of the text, a *covenant*-festival at all, as was commonly thought. Other scholars, especially John Van Seters and Hans Heinrich Schmid, had reached similar conclusions, and Nicholson decided to examine the whole history of the covenant within the Old Testament and in biblical scholarship in a systematic way. The result was *God and His People*. In this he establishes that the earliest references to the covenant in the Old

Testament are in the book of Hosea, and therefore cannot be earlier than the eighth century BCE: it was not a theme with which the early prophets were familiar. Accordingly the stories of Moses in which it appears are unlikely to precede the prophets, but represent a reading back of later concepts. This has implications for the date of the J and E sources, in which the covenant appears: both Schmid and Van Seters had redated these sources to the exilic or post-exilic age, a radical departure from earlier theories. Nicholson's discoveries about the covenant tended to support such revisionism, though he stressed that the idea had pre-exilic roots.

In *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century* he surveyed the whole course of modern Pentateuchal study, and once again introduced the anglophone reader to developing theories in the German-speaking world, though also discussing scholars in North America such as Van Seters. The leading idea of the book, as signalled in the subtitle *The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen*, was to trace the threads leading from Wellhausen's epoch-making discoveries and show how they had unravelled in various ways in twentieth-century biblical criticism. Many theories of Pentateuchal composition in the latter half of the twentieth century became immensely complex, but Nicholson captures them with his customary clarity of exposition and, more than that, shows how they interrelate—what coherence there has been in the development of one theory from another. He remained cautious about all the theories surveyed. As he suggested in his paper to the International Organisation for the Study of the Old Testament at Leuven in 1989, 'The Pentateuch: a time for caution',[11] things were in flux, and it was too soon to pronounce any final verdicts, hard though it was that the older certainties appeared to be evaporating.

In retirement Nicholson worked on *Oriel College: a History*, contributing two chapters: 'Eveleigh and Copleston: the pre-eminence of Oriel' (pp. 247–90) and 'Hawkins, Monro, and university reforms' (pp. 408–43). Already in his Inaugural Lecture as Oriel Professor he had set out the circumstances under which the chair had been set up just a hundred years before,[12] and had learned much about the history of Oriel, where it has always been attached, and of the nineteenth-century Church and University; and these chapters built upon that foundation. He also

[11] Published in J. A. Emerton (ed.), *Congress Volume Leuven 1989* (Leiden, 1991).
[12] E. W. Nicholson, *Interpreting the Old Testament: a Century of the Oriel Professorship* (Oxford, 1981).

contributed to a volume produced by the Oxford Old Testament Seminar, which he had chaired throughout his tenure of the Oriel Professorship.[13]

Nicholson's final book comes full circle and returns to Deuteronomy. In *Deuteronomy and the Judaean Diaspora* he now argues that *centralisation* of worship was not the original concern of King Josiah, but rather *purification*. The impression that centralisation was what mattered has been introduced into the account of Josiah's reforms by the addition of 2 Kings 23:8a, 9 to an earlier narrative. This is a deuteronomistic addition, one of whose aims is to give the impression that most readers have accepted: that Josiah was working to bring the cult in line with the book of Deuteronomy itself—which certainly is concerned with centralisation. But if these verses have indeed been added to make the reform *seem* inspired by Deuteronomy, and they are from the community in exile, like other deuteronomistic passages in the Bible, then Deuteronomy cannot have been in reality the book found in the Temple (as *Deuteronomy and Tradition* had argued). Indeed, it probably postdates the original text of Kings, and is thus almost certainly to be dated during the Babylonian Exile, not in the reign of Josiah at all. Its anti-assimilation rhetoric is not really, as appears on the surface, concerned with the relation of Israel to the Canaanites, but is instead in practice a plea not to assimilate to the Babylonian culture within which the addressees are now living. Thus Deuteronomy is a work from the exilic age (roughly, 586–520 BCE). This is not argued on the basis of any ideological commitment to the idea that all biblical books are 'late', which is a trend at the moment within Old Testament scholarship; it is arrived at by very minute examination of particular portions of the text. It represents a thorough revision of Nicholson's first book, but by the use of similar, historical-critical argumentation. It shows his remarkable open-mindedness and willingness to revisit his own earlier arguments.[14]

Nicholson was thus a highly significant scholar who both introduced fellow scholars and students to the critical scene in biblical studies, and himself contributed original and formative ideas, giving his major books an authoritative status within the discipline.

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[13] E. W. Nicholson, 'Deuteronomy 18:9–22, the Prophets and Scripture', in J. Day (ed.), *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (New York and London, 2010), pp. 151–71.

[14] Already noted by Emerton, 'Introduction', p. xxxxvi.

Ernest Nicholson's books and articles influenced many in the world of Old Testament studies, and will long continue to do so. But as important an influence as his published scholarship was his personal engagement with people. His students held him in high regard, as did the many other people his work brought him into contact with in all the universities where he worked. As a lecturer he was always open to continuing the discussion after the lecture with anyone who was interested, and his unaffected friendliness made him much sought after. His marriage to Hazel was the foundation of his happiness, and she was critical to all the entertaining and sociability in which they both engaged. In his days as Professor in Oxford they frequently entertained colleagues and students alike in their home. In the Faculty Nicholson was a constructive and conciliatory figure, widely regarded as 'a safe pair of hands' when contentious matters needed resolution.

As Provost of Oriel he saw his role as something like the head of a family, with responsibilities towards Fellows, students and domestic staff in equal measure. Though there was a chaplain, on whose preserves he did not trespass and whose work he did everything to support, he was also always aware of his own responsibilities as a priest to seek the good of those under his care, and he did this without patronising or dominating them. He was well known for having a fund of anecdotes and tall stories with which he would lighten the atmosphere, and put those he met—especially any who were shy or awkward—at their ease. Always conscious of his humble roots and early academic failure, he was able to encourage students who felt out of their element in Oxbridge or who were themselves aware of poor academic performance. This was much in evidence when he visited state schools with little or no Oxbridge tradition, where he was often able (as few are) to counter both of the equal and opposite feelings that keep some students from applying to leading universities: a sense of inferiority, on the one hand, and on the other the assumption that the other students will be such 'toffs' that no sensible person would want to join them anyway. Nicholson could easily puncture both beliefs simply by being himself, as someone who had 'come up the hard way' and was manifestly not a toff, yet who rightly enjoyed what a university like Oxford had to offer in intellectual challenges, collegial scholarship and good fellowship.

He was very much a 'college man' in his devotion to the colleges he was successively part of (and indeed to others—St Peter's made him an Honorary Fellow after he helped them to fund their chaplaincy). Already as a Lecturer at TCD his excellence in relations with both students and colleagues contributed greatly to the growth of his department in the

1960s, so that it came to have a real standing in TCD as a whole. Though no bon viveur, in all his colleges he never missed the various Feasts and Gaudies that marked the college year, because they were part of endorsing the colleges' corporate identities. And in any case he loved sociability. At Oriel he and Hazel entertained all the first year students in batches to Sunday lunch through the autumn term, not drawing on the College kitchen but catering themselves in the Lodgings—so that they would know every new student in the College by Christmas, not through a formal interview but through having shared a domestic meal with them. He also knew all the College's domestic staff and much of their family histories, and would visit any who were in hospital or needed help. He was something like George Herbert's 'country parson', with the College as his parish.

This may give the impression of someone so tied up with college affairs as to leave no time for a personal life, but this could not be further from the truth. The Nicholsons had four children, Rosalind, Kathryn, Peter and Jane. Peter died tragically young after an epileptic seizure in Mexico, where he had married and settled down, in 2011—a massive blow to the whole family, which is a close one. But the family had in earlier times had an additional member for a time, for in Cambridge the Nicholsons had taken care of the little son of an Australian graduate student, John Nolland, whose wife was suffering from a brain tumour. David did not live with them, but for over three years he spent every weekday with the family and was treated as one of them, sharing in all their family celebrations. Ernest and Hazel were always generous in the hospitality of their home to others, too, well known for their parties and dinners, and for social skills sometimes lacking among academics. These were part of what made Nicholson such an effective fund-raiser, perhaps precisely because they proceeded from genuine friendliness and interest in others. Rich people he approached knew, of course, that they were targets for a fund-raising pitch, but found that it was not done cynically or glibly, and that Nicholson was deeply committed to the cause he was advocating and concerned that they should see the true need, not simply be flattered into parting with money. His own integrity was always apparent, without being trumpeted.

Among influential contacts was the President of Italy, Francesco Cossiga, an Honorary Fellow of Oriel. Interested in John Henry Newman, he spent some time at Oriel, Newman's College, and the Provost and his wife had of course to entertain him. The friendship that resulted from this led to an invitation to visit the President in Rome—a trip that included an

audience with Pope John Paul II—and in due course also to the award of Commander, Order of Merit from the Republic of Italy.

One might gather from all this that Nicholson was a self-assured man who could, as it were, spare a thought for others because he was so secure in himself. But this was far from the case. He was indeed a tall and imposing figure with 'presence': potential donors would realise at once that they were meeting someone of substance and distinction. Yet his kindness to others, which was legendary, proceeded from an awareness of his own human frailty. He was subject to anxiety and self-doubt, and did not make decisions easily, though he made them conscientiously. The support of Hazel was always critically important to his well-being in this respect. As Canon Noel Battye, his chaplain at Pembroke for five years (1973–8), observed at his memorial service:

> Some of his greatest virtues were of the unfashionable sort which have become all too rare of late: a desire for perfection, which sometimes made life difficult for himself and those around him, as he aspired for the very best without ever cutting a corner, even in little things; a certain nostalgia for a lost world where right and wrong were clearly defined so as to provide guidelines for a rising generation; a world of black and white, not confusing shades of grey for those who were growing up; a sense of duty and obligation, whereby you did what was best and right no matter what the personal cost; and finally a sense of vocation and service, in which all that you did was because it happened to be your particular calling in life, and not because of those rewards which sully and degrade so many once-honourable professions today.

Ernest Nicholson was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer in the autumn of 2012. He was to live until 22 December 2013, and for much of that time was well enough still to enjoy his family and to work on his final book, though much depleted in energy. His funeral was held at St Peter's, Wolvercote, his local parish church, where he had often officiated and preached over the years. To many, including the present writer, he was a true and steadfast friend, who remained very much himself until the end.

JOHN BARTON
Fellow of the Academy