

# H. Wheeler Robinson :

## I. A FRIEND'S TRIBUTE.

MY acquaintance and my friendship with Wheeler Robinson goes back exactly fifty years. I had gone up to Mansfield in 1894 and it was in 1895 that he entered in company with R. H. Coats, E. W. Franks, L. H. Gaunt, R. M. Moffat and David Stewart. It was with the last named that Robinson developed peculiar intimacy, an intellectual and spiritual kinship the story of which he fittingly recorded in the *Mansfield Magazine* for December, 1933. But I saw much of him, and even then, if I had to sum him up in a word it would have been "thorough". Apart from his being a Baptist like Coats, and, like him again, pursuing the (to most of us) appalling road of Semitics, he had the distinction of not living in "digs", but like Paul, "in his own hired dwelling" in Walton Street, with his widowed mother. Their home was an oasis for me as for others. We did not meet much in class as his course was *sui generis*, but the memory of many an afternoon walk and tea is still clear. Walking and bezique with his mother were so far as recollection serves, his only recreation apart from novel reading. I cannot recall him as a river man. My outstanding impression of him in those days is that of a man who had set his face steadfastly, who knew where he was going; he had his eye on Pitlochry long before he went there, and I should not wonder if Regent's Park was not somewhere on his horizon.

He took his Schools in 1898, a year after me. I think it was a disappointment to him—it certainly was a surprise to his contemporaries—that the examiners (Gwilliam, Cowley and his own tutor Buchanan Gray) did not award him a First Class. It was speedily manifest that they had been handling a first-class man, for in that same year and the next three (partly spent in Marburg and Strassburg) he swept the board of all the University prizes in his subject.

Our ways were devious for a while. I was in India and he at Pitlochry building securely on foundations well and truly laid, and combining with what must have been an inspiring pastorate those methodical and painstaking habits of study that soon began to bear rich fruit in his published work. I remember H. R. Mackintosh of New College, Edinburgh once remarking to me that he knew no man who cut a lawn more closely.

When I settled at Romsey in 1905, Robinson had been two years in Coventry and I spent a day with him there. This was the prelude to closer and more prolonged association in Yorkshire, for he was called to Rawdon in 1906 and I to Bradford three

years later. It was a peculiar joy to have his presence and generous words at my induction. Old Testament Studies at Rawdon being in Principal Blomfield's care, Robinson undertook Church History and Philosophy of Religion, in both of which he quickly made himself at home. He had Latin as an extra and rejoiced as he had not done much at it heretofore. Between 1909 and 1917, when I went to Edinburgh, we saw a good deal of each other, for my home at Menston was only two or three miles from his, and our wives and children also got to know one another. Curiously enough, we both hoped to make our eldest boys Grecians (Bernard learned his Greek numerals, cardinal and ordinal, going up and downstairs), but both went off to Science, in Bernard's case humanized by music.

All the time Wheeler Robinson was going from strength to strength, and it was universally recognised that the right man was in the right place when he went to Regent's Park in 1920, two years before I went to Lancashire College.

I have a hazy memory of dining with him at Regent's, a clearer one of a journey from Paddington to Oxford one Sunday night after we had both been preaching in London. Still more vivid are recollections of him as a fellow examiner at the University of London, and particularly of the inside of a week spent in visiting the Welsh Theological Colleges as commissioners from the University of Wales. That was in 1935 when our colleagues were Dr. Joyce, bishop of Monmouth and Dr. Maldwyn Hughes of Wesley House, Cambridge, both of them now gone. When our journeyings were done we drew up our report at Robinson's home in St. Giles. That same summer I met his daughter Monica at Salisbury in Rhodesia.

The last time I saw Robinson was on a summer day just before he retired, when, with manifest and justifiable pride and joy, he showed my wife and myself over the new Regent's Park, and spoke of what had yet to be added. Oxford had laid its spell upon him since his student days, and his devotion to her was repaid in the end by the affection and esteem with which she welcomed him to high offices.

Wheeler Robinson was a rather heavy smoker—a piper—he introduced me long ago to Dill, which led on to Edgeworth. There was a certain austerity and detachment about him, but he was a good companion and a staunch friend in cloudy days. He always had something fresh to debate and was at his best, a prince among peers, at the summer and winter meetings of the Society for Old Testament Study. There never was a man more ready to share his extensive knowledge with others. And never man more dependable, as I found in connection with our work on Peake's *Commentary* and its Supplement. The last note I had from him

was a kindly warning not to buy a certain American book on Ezekiel which I had fancied.

I have often thought what an International Critical Commentary he could have given us on Isaiah 28-66, in continuation of Gray's work—Gray's mantle descended on him—or on the prophet of his heart, Jeremiah. But his later interests were more doctrinal and philosophical though he remained true to the end to history. A staunch Free Churchman, he none the less had a spirit truly catholic. He never let himself be drawn into denominational machinery; on the other hand, he took part in compiling the revised Baptist hymnbook. What he did for the raising of ministerial efficiency on its academic side, not only in his own communion, will long be an inspiration; but Robinson was more than a scholar and a teacher. He was "far ben" in the things of the spirit. To our eyes he died too early, but he said of David Stewart: "A strange sense of joy and gratitude underlies the sorrow". While he was conspicuously "a workman needing not to be ashamed", one to whom anything shoddy, shallow or pretentious, was abhorrent, he gave the utmost for the highest. He knew and helped others to know "the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the koinonia of the Holy Spirit".

A. J. GRIEVE.

## II.

### WHEELER ROBINSON: OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLAR.

ON the close of the first world war, Christian scholars of all branches made determined efforts to get into touch with their colleagues in Germany, and do what they could to repair the moral damage wrought by the conflict. They hoped also that by developing close personal relations between people belonging to the two countries they might do something to decrease the chances of renewed conflict. A real opportunity came in 1923 with the news that the world-famous Old Testament periodical, *Die Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* was in serious danger of extinction owing to lack of support. Proposals were at once made from the British side, which were aimed at rendering the journal even more completely international than it had been before the war. The Editor intimated that he would be glad to have a contribution in English, and the British choice fell on Wheeler Robinson, as the person who was most

likely to represent the best that this country had to produce in Old Testament scholarship. His paper on the nature of prophetic inspiration was published in the Z.A.W. in 1923.

Co-operation between Old Testament scholars of all countries developed, and an international gathering was held at Oxford in 1927, and another at Göttingen in 1935. At this last, representative scholars were invited to take part; one from each of the more important countries to read a longer paper and others to offer shorter contributions. The selection was made by the German scholars themselves, as inviting hosts, and they spread their net as widely as possible. Only one University—that of Wales—had as many as two representatives on the programme, but nearly every University in western Europe—to say nothing of America—was honoured by having one name on the list. There was only one possibility for the longer paper from a British scholar, and that again was Wheeler Robinson. When he finished reading it the ablest of the German scholars whispered to a British colleague, "We have no one in this country to compare with this man in his own field." We are justified in believing that he held an unique position, standing head and shoulders above every other scholar of our time in his special branch of Old Testament studies.

Of course, he had his limitations, and, being human, was largely unconscious of them. This, unfortunately, led him to give time and trouble to branches of study with which he was less qualified to deal with than his own speciality. He knew little or nothing of archæology and was not greatly interested in textual criticism. The value of history for him lay in the underlying philosophical issues, particularly that of time and eternity; he never visualised it as a biology of the organised human community. He was not, and never could have been, a higher critic, and, where critical work was necessary, he was content to accept the views of others, not always judiciously balanced. His little book *The Cross of Jeremiah*, for example, contains four chapters. The first is a critical sketch of the book, the other three are devoted to the spiritual values revealed in the prophet's life and work. The one is a third class piece of work; the rest is something above first class. He was, as every higher critic would agree, right in supposing that this particular study was necessary only as a preliminary to fuller appreciation of the text and subject matter, and he was content to let others do it for him. *The Old Testament: its Making and Meaning* devotes about fifty pages to the Prophetic literature. A page and a half is given to the "Making"—quite sound as far as it goes, but far from being a complete statement of the modern position. His small *History of Israel* is magnificent, but it is not history,

except in the sense that actual events are accurately recorded. His commentaries in the Century Bible (Deuteronomy and Joshua), written during the days of his pastorate in Coventry, are neither particularly inspiring nor illuminating (we may contrast the work of men like Peake and Skinner in the same series), and gave little indication of his real greatness. He was a good Hebrew scholar, and the Old Testament to him meant the Hebrew text, not a translation. It is the more to be regretted that he did not concentrate wholly on one side of Old Testament studies and give us a systematised "Theology of the Old Testament." This is one of the big gaps in modern Biblical scholarship, and no man was ever better fitted to fill it. At the same time, he may have felt that the practical administrative work in which a College Principal is necessarily involved would not give him the time he needed. It was no small thing to move a great college from London to Oxford, and then to embark on a building scheme. He believed, too, that good writing must always be done slowly, and he would never have been content with anything less than the best. So the great work was never written, and the world is the poorer for its loss. But we can see the general lines he would have taken from his contributions to Manson's *Companion to the Bible* and to *Record and Revelation*, of which he was himself the editor, and also from his Speaker's Lectures, "Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament," which, it is hoped, will shortly be published.

For Wheeler Robinson was by instinct and by interest a theologian, and his approach was inevitably psychological and philosophical. It was a fortunate thing that his college training gave him the discipline of Hebrew, and that he studied under Buchanan Gray—perhaps the greatest all-round Old Testament scholar this country has ever produced. He was thus able to bring a real knowledge of the Bible to his theological studies. He gave the world a taste of his quality in his *Religious Ideas of the Old Testament*, a book which, though small in extent, is rich in thought, and will stand for generations as the soundest text-book on the subject. The use he could make of his Old Testament knowledge may be seen in other works also, as for example in his *Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*—another book which stands in a class by itself.

One aspect of Wheeler Robinson's greatness was, of course, his ability to absorb the ideas of his predecessors. We must not speak of his reproducing them, for when they appeared in his work, as they rightly and properly did, they had been transmuted by his own peculiar genius and woven into his own general fabric. But, of course, he had his own special contribution to make, and it may be summed up in the phrase "Corporate Personality."

This was a new idea to the theological world—or at least the formulation of it was new—and as long as the Bible is studied it will have an important effect on men's religious thinking. It expresses the psychological fact that the limits of personality were not defined in Hebrew thought in the same way as they are with us, and that a group of what we should regard as separate individuals may be regarded as a single spiritual entity. Similar or parallel ideas have been developed along different lines by Pedersen in Denmark and Johnson in this country, but "Corporate Personality" will be for ever associated with Wheeler Robinson as its most striking and independent exponent. It has already thrown a flood of light on much that was obscure or disputable in the thought of the Old Testament, and it is impossible to forecast the length to which it may ultimately lead us. We may certainly regard it as being the starting point of a new era in the study of Biblical theology.

A scholar may be either an artisan or an artist or, in rare instances, both. Wheeler Robinson's methods were essentially those of the artisan. In studying an idea he would laboriously collect, compare, contrast and summarise the various shades of meaning which might be ascribed to a single word—not infrequently drawing a graph of an idea. He had no patience with the worker who saw his way through a literature by sheer insight, and, while he was reading it, became for the time a sympathetic contemporary of the author. He offered the strongest contrast to the other great Baptist scholar of our time, Reavely Glover, and the two men, tragically enough, never did or could have understood one another. The amazing thing about Wheeler Robinson's genius was that he constantly produced great works of art by the methods of the artisan. Students complained that he was difficult to read. This is inevitable in the case of a great original thinker; nobody pretends that Plato's *Phaedrus* is a suitable book for the nursery. But his style is magnificent, stately and polished, and a student who will take the trouble to study it, not merely to read it superficially, will be amply rewarded, and will feel that he has entered into communion with one of the greatest minds of our day.

One thing, the best of all, must be added. All Wheeler Robinson's work was inspired and controlled by profoundly deep religious experience and feeling. Great theologian as he was, we never get the best of him in his more formal work. For that we must turn to some of his "little" books, productions like *The Cross of Job* and *The Cross of Jeremiah*. Here we have the true man, the scholar whose thought was dominated by the Cross, and whose life was lived in the Christ who was crucified for him.

THEODORE H. ROBINSON.