



Norman Porteous as I Remember Him

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I was appointed as an Assistant Lecturer in the University of Edinburgh on 1st February, 1960 and I stayed in that post until September 30th 1964, when I was upgraded to a full lecturer in Old Testament Studies. I then stayed on in Edinburgh in this capacity under Professor George Anderson until September 30th 1967, when I returned to Cambridge to take up a similar post there. So for a period of more than seven years I knew Professor Porteous as a senior colleague and, until the arrival of John Gibson, I was specifically responsible for teaching elementary Hebrew as his assistant. In name the post was in Semitic Languages, but, apart from a small amount of Syriac, the work was initially entirely for the teaching of Hebrew. They were important years of transition for New College, and a time of change, I believe, for Norman. Of course it was also an immensely important time for me. After 3½ years as a Baptist minister I was starting an academic career in which I very much wanted to stay. In many ways it marked a fresh departure in my theological education and I am now conscious how much the presence and influence of Norman Porteous was a significant factor. He was well versed in the areas of scholarship that interested me most, both at the time and subsequently.

I was also fortunate to have been accepted as a part-time student at Sheffield University to study for a PhD in the recently opened department of Biblical Studies, initially with F. F. Bruce as Supervisor. However, life as a Baptist minister and the lack of any nearby well-stocked library, had, up to that point, made progress rather slow. It was now time to catch up and make good the deficit. Norman Porteous proved a valuable resource in making that progress possible. The times were, of course, changing for me – Cambridge graduate, Baptist, and English. I had never set foot north of the border until I went for a brief interview with Norman in November 1959 *after* he had already appointed me to be his junior colleague and assistant.

In New College expansion and growth were the order of the day, although from the state of the buildings all of that was still in the future. By the time I left to return to Cambridge big changes were beginning to take effect, but when I arrived in 1960 very little seemed to have altered since 1846. I well recall some time in about 1965 giving a lecture on the history of Israel in one of the old examination rooms, when the wood panelling suddenly became detached and a man appeared - not the ghost of Principal Rainy, nor the 'angel of the Lord' as the subject might have allowed, but a workman who had been repairing the wall and was unable to get back to his starting-point.

In spite of the excellence of the teaching in Hebrew I had received from David Winton Thomas, I did not particularly want to be a linguistic specialist, as so many Old Testament scholars at that period. New translations of the Bible were very much at the centre of popular attention. The major such project was that for the New English Bible, and Norman Porteous, like most of the leading Old Testament scholars of the period, was directly involved in it. It took up a good deal of time, especially during vacation periods when other projects might have been worked on.

Its chief supporters, academic, ecclesiastical, and the University publishing houses, were hoping to revitalise popular interest in the Bible in the belief that the archaic language and idiom of the Authorised Version were putting people off reading it. It did not appear to me that this was where the chief problems lay, and already there was a growing recognition among scholars that popular disenchantment with the Old Testament was based on more fundamental problems of a theological nature. Bible translation was expected to solve more problems than was reasonably possible. At the same time other, more directly theological, issues were being neglected. Chief among these was the question how the Old Testament could make a contribution that would command the attention of other branches of theology.

During the time that I was there it was not only the buildings and status of New College that changed very visibly, but I think that Norman Porteous also changed a good deal during those years. When I arrived

he was at the peak of his academic reputation and was at the period in academic life where most major scholars would hope to publish a *magnum opus*. Certainly he was expected by many in Great Britain to do so, and I think that, at the time, he was fully confident of achieving this. It was his central focus of ambition and he was always eager to talk about the subject and its developments. He certainly had all the essential background and ability for the task, and the major foundations for it were already laid.

The only peer in the field was Norman's friend Aubrey Johnson, H. H. Rowley's son-in-law. However, seen in retrospect, the differences between these two men were too great for this to have any real significance. Johnson's work, in line with much of that undertaken at that time, was quite heavily directed towards showing that the Old Testament was the product of the ancient Near-Eastern world. He stressed the conviction that 'Hebrew thinking' was unlike modern thought processes and did not fit into a modern Western frame of thought. This was a legacy of the psychological-anthropological theories of the 1920s and tended to emphasise the gap that separated the modern reader from the Old Testament. Contrastingly, the Porteous concern with Old Testament theology emphasised the central role played by the Old Testament in Christian theology and belief in the biblical revelation of God. This was no doubt a consequence of Scotland's academic inheritance in the Westminster Confession.

Norman was, in any case, an unquestioned master in the fields of classical and Semitic languages and he was fully aware that theology had its own history, methods and academic credentials. The discipline in general stood tall in the Scottish academic world and his wide familiarity with its nature and methods brought a depth to his perception of it which was unrivalled. For him the subject could never be held aside from the mainstream of theological disciplines.

In 1960 I certainly regarded myself as fortunate indeed to be a junior colleague of the scholar who was recognised as the supreme authority in Great Britain regarding the way forward for the subject. It seemed that anyone who knew anything about the subject at all had learned

it through the essays and surveys published by Norman Porteous. To him it was a necessary branch of theology, not an awkward offshoot of Near-Eastern studies, and this was fundamental to the way he approached the subject. This fact made the prospect of a completed volume from his pen both highly desirable and readily expected. What he had published up to that point were pointers and guidelines, setting out certain parameters for the discipline. They staked a claim and showed that something substantial was in preparation.

Back in 1960 Norman Porteous was the only British scholar who knew at first hand the German scholars in the field and their writings. These especially included Ernst Sellin (his own teacher), Walther Eichrodt and Artur Weiser. When I attended my first International Old Testament Congress in Geneva in 1965, it was a great pleasure to spend time in his company when he recalled their work and introduced me to a number of them. He seemed to know them all at first hand and had observed with interest the rise of the up-and-coming stars. Moreover he was always glad to recall that his primary commitment was to the subject of theology in its own right, having been profoundly enthused in this direction by attending lectures in Münster from Karl Barth in the late 1920s. Only the insistence of Adam Welch in 1931, that he was the person to fill the vacant post in St Andrews University, had called him back to the task of teaching Old Testament.

The awareness in Great Britain was very much alive that the nation was passing through a transitional, ‘post-war’, period, when much of the social and intellectual legacy of the 1930s was changing quite dramatically. This certainly applied to theology and biblical studies, marking a necessity to come to terms with new names, new attitudes and new themes. Norman Porteous could very ably serve as a bridge between the pre- and post-war periods, especially where this affected biblical scholarship.

His primary focus on the subject of Old Testament theology is well shown by his Presidential address to the Society for Old Testament Study in 1954 entitled, ‘The Old Testament and Some Theological Thought-Forms’.⁵¹ It followed up his earlier address to the Society

on the subject, entitled ‘Towards a Theology of the Old Testament’, given in Cardiff in 1946.⁵² His reputation as the outstanding British authority in the field, after the death of H. Wheeler Robinson, was firmly established and he appeared mentally to have a provisional shape and framework for such a task already in mind. He reviewed all the major books on the subject and was able to write confidently and freely. So far as Great Britain was concerned, the name that he particularly looked up to as his immediate forerunner in the field was that of H. Wheeler Robinson, whose volume *Inspiration and Revelation* he saw as an important prologue to the subject.

Yet this promising situation had changed significantly by the time I left in 1967. New demands on his time from many quarters and new responsibilities in the College culminating in his acceptance of the Principalship brought about significant revision of plans. For him the time spent with the translation panel of the *NEB* was away from his primary interest. The first major writing he undertook after my arrival in 1960 was the short commentary on the book of Daniel for the series *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*. This proved to be the last substantial writing task that he completed, and no doubt more than one factor contributed to this.

In the forefront of this need for reconsideration and delay was the work of Gerhard von Rad. No other author in the field, seemed to him to pose as great a demand for further reflection. He himself makes reference to this fact in the brief account of his own intellectual development.⁵³ The first volume of von Rad’s Old Testament theology appeared in 1957 and, I recall Norman remarking that, as soon as he had a copy to hand, he had left aside almost all other duties in order to read it. Surprisingly to my mind, although he expressed great admiration for it, he was far from convinced of its general thrust. In his review of it for the *SOTS Book List*,⁵⁴ he noted its contents in detail, but offered little by way of overall critical assessment. In conversation he was reluctant to express the outright approval for it that I rather expected. This surprised me since I was, at that time, completely enthralled by it and he was clearly conscious that it was widely regarded as a most significant new development.

After its publication Norman seemed resigned to the fact that the subject was now going to demand more work than he could engage in immediately. It introduced some exciting fresh perspectives, but it also seemed to throw the subject into a measure of disarray. As a novice in the subject, bowled over with enthusiasm for the work, I was rather taken aback by his caution regarding it. He continued to express deep admiration, but always tempered with words of caution. When discussing the subject he consistently affirmed his high regard for the more systematic approach of Walther Eichrodt - rather to my dismay! He would affirm that theology itself, as a subject, demanded a systematic approach. Some points in particular he focused on. He clearly sensed that the work contained several speculative forays which needed looking into more closely, but overall he was ill at ease with its lack of systematic structure.

Obviously personal and academic responsibilities played some part in leading to Norman's putting off, at least for the time being, the publication of his Stone lectures, given in Princeton in 1953, and the larger project of writing an Old Testament theology. In 1960, both tasks had seemed to me to be not too far off. Yet this postponement was also a reflection of his unease regarding these fresh approaches to the subject. He felt that the concept of *Heilsgeschichte* possessed 'an ambiguous character' and was too open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.⁵⁵

In 1970 Brevard Childs published his book *Biblical Theology in Crisis*, arguing that the whole subject of biblical theology had fallen into serious difficulties and calling for a radical revision about its credentials. The review of this volume which Norman wrote for the 1971 *Book List* concludes with a remark which reflects very well the gentleness and caution with which he expressed his criticism, but which, nonetheless is all the more telling for its presence: 'There is just a suggestion of artificiality in the treatment.'⁵⁶ Such a comment reflected what I believe Norman felt more extensively, not only about this particular book, but about what, by that time, were the several widely published attempts which had appeared. It was not difficult to construct theories; it was more difficult to draw out the actualities of

faith as they really were. He was well aware, as others at the time were also fully aware, that historical fact and theological truth often overlap, but they are not the same category of intellectual research. His own teacher Ernst Sellin had highlighted the point more than thirty years before in regard to a theology of the Old Testament.

The remark seems to me to be symptomatic of the way that Norman felt the subject in general was developing and more especially regarding the rather forced attempts to overcome the difficulties that are inherent to it. There could be no quick fixes. Biblical interpretation must remain grounded in an ongoing experience of life lived as a spiritual pilgrimage. What initially appeared to me to be the rather disconcerting title of his volume of collected essays was nonetheless a tellingly meaningful one: *Living the Mystery*. Only by engaging in the actuality of a spiritual quest can theology have any true meaning. Theology that is simply an artificially constructed ‘system’ is unlikely to withstand the hard knocks that faith will inevitably encounter.

Along with a mere handful of theological students from England I had had the opportunity to hear in 1953 Norman repeat in Spurgeon’s College in London the Stone Lectures bearing the title *History, Community and Revelation*. They made a strong impression on me at the time since they bridged the important borderland between theology and the linguistic, literary and historical fields of research which otherwise dominated Old Testament publications. They probably had a lot to do with my own development of a special interest in the subject of Old Testament theology. I was genuinely disappointed in 1960 to find that they were not shortly to appear in print since they raised big questions about the place of the Old Testament in the theological curriculum. After five years of quite intense Hebrew study I had several unanswered questions and Norman Porteous was the first world-class scholar I had had heard who had recognised these issues as major ones.

I should like to single out one particular feature of those lectures which made a big impression on me at the time. In retrospect, its significance appears to me such that it still warrants careful attention. It concerns the importance that they attached to the notion of the ‘community of God’ as a key to understanding the nature of the Bible and the nature of

divine revelation. This feature appears prominently in their title since, when faced with the question: ‘What is the link between historical events and the scriptural interpretation of those events as divine revelation?’, the answer that is presented is: ‘community’. In particular Norman pointed to the unnamed, unremembered, men and women, often poor and downtrodden, who had kept the faith in difficult times. The role of the individual prophet as the unique bearer of inspiration had been a prominent feature of Wheeler Robinson’s book.⁵⁷ From an altogether different direction Walther Eichrodt, in the first of his planned volumes of Old Testament theology, had given a major place to the idea of ‘covenant’ as the key concept which held together all the multifarious ideas of the Old Testament. For Norman ‘covenant’ was too much a piece of abstract terminology. It could serve as the cement for an intellectual construction, but it could not adequately explain the historical realities out of which the Old Testament had taken shape. Ideas require minds to think them and human flesh and blood to carry their message into effect.

Inspired individuals had brought to the world knowledge of God. Yet between these leaders who had spoken the words, and the pages of the Bible where they are recorded for posterity, were a host of unknown men and women whose lives were shaped by what they had heard. It was they who told, and retold, the stories of their national ancestors and heroes. They too played a vital role in bringing us the Bible. It was they who held the key to understanding the continuity of the biblical tradition.

If I recall correctly, Norman claimed that he had learned this from Adam Welch, but, in any case, it was a vital truth for his own life. He saw himself as part of a Church; he saw his work as engaged pastorally and personally in the ongoing life of a religious community. This was true both in College among the students and in church life in the city. Being a member of this community of faith was a part of ‘doing theology’. Even the concept of covenant lacked essential meaning if there were no community which could embody the privileges and constraints that such a covenant implied.

I recall that at almost the same time that I arrived in Edinburgh Norman was involved in the appointment of Peter Ackroyd to the Samuel Davidson Chair in London University. I had known Peter slightly as a lecturer in Cambridge and Norman asked me about him. I was intrigued a little while later to find that Peter's inaugural lecture in London bore the title *Continuity: A Contribution to the Study of the Old Testament Religious Tradition*.⁵⁸ It certainly appeared that he had also, like me, been drawn by the Porteous insight. Sure enough, when I looked up my copy of the lecture I found relevant references to Norman's published essays on the subject. Between the text of the Bible which we now possess, and the putative prophets, authors and storytellers who had first spoken the words, were a great many men and women who had not only been the bearers of those words, but whose lives had been shaped by them. Tradition cannot remain an abstraction if it is to be an effective instrument for the shaping of human life. Peter, who went on to a distinguished career of publications and essay-writing, returned to the theme more than once. Bearing in mind how heavily, in the scholarship of the period, the term 'tradition' was cropping up, it appears to me to have been a very worthwhile and significant contribution that Norman Porteous made. He had drawn attention to the men and women – the 'communities of faith' – who had given life and continuity to the otherwise abstract concept of 'tradition'. The point could easily be elaborated further, but I can desist from that, since it is easy enough to trace its further impact.

Norman Porteous was certainly very much aware of being part of a comparable great tradition whose works had shaped, and reshaped, theological and biblical studies in Scotland. Humour was never far away when he recalled their achievements. This was never to belittle them, but rather a way of setting them in perspective. Certainly it would be wholly wide of the mark not to recall this sense of fun which enabled him to celebrate greatness, without becoming over-awed by it. He was proud to be part of this academic tradition. For him 'continuity' had a distinctive Scottish, and theological, dimension to it. Certainly for me he left an indelible awareness that ideas of continuity and tradition, which were increasingly coming into the forefront of biblical theology, remain abstractions, until they are embodied in the communities of

faith which give them life. Theology will never commend itself if it remains an artificial construction. It, like the Godhead, requires to be 'clothed in flesh' in order to be understood.