

Reviews

A. A. Anderson: *The Psalms (New Century Bible)*. 2 Vols. Oliphants, London, 1972. Pp. 966. Price £5.50 each volume.

The study of the Psalms in the twentieth century has occasioned a number of far-reaching revisions and re-appraisals of our understanding of worship in ancient Israel, and, correspondingly, of our understanding of all worship. In this research the names of two scholars stand out above all others, those of Hermann Gunkel and Sigmund Mowinckel. Both scholars devoted a very substantial part of their active research to the Psalter, publishing from time to time articles, monographs, and finally in Gunkel's case a substantial Commentary and an Introduction summarizing a lifetime's work. In his later work Mowinckel changed very considerably his views from those which he had earlier put forward in his *Psalmstudien* of 1921-26, thereby adding to the complexity of assessing his contribution. If we add to the work of these men the distinctive views of such scholars as A. R. Johnson and H. J. Kraus, not to mention a host of others, it becomes evident that the task of writing a commentary on the Psalms is a formidable assignment. The sheer volume of material to be examined is immense, and the divergence of opinion among scholars so considerable that no simple solutions are likely to satisfy, and no one-sided approach is likely to last for long. It is not surprising therefore that Psalm studies have suffered from the lack of a good modern commentary which is able to take account of the complexity of the problems involved and to present at least the most important among the varied possibilities of interpretation.

It is in this scholarly context that A. A. Anderson's two volumes are to be greeted and regarded as a very substantial landmark in Psalm studies. This is in no way to suppose that these volumes solve all the problems and thereby conclude a chapter in Old Testament research, but simply to express the view that they are much better than any comparable commentary. They go a long way towards summarising and assessing the variety of views on basic problems currently proposed, so that one is not left simply with one possibility out of many, and they also cover the separate aspects of the Psalms which call for detailed investigation. In the forefront here we must place the problem of the text itself, which is often obscure, and in which the textual transmission is suspect in a host of places. Inadequate attention to the text has marred several commentaries, notably those of A. Weiser and H. J. Kraus, where too little space is devoted to its problems. On this count Anderson's volumes are very commendable, and a considerable wealth of textual and philological material has been included. The basic text used is that of the RSV, as with other volumes of the New Century Bible but reference is made to other versions, including the NEB and the rather radical renderings of M. Dahood in the *Anchor*

Bible. More important, a great deal of information from a wide range of literature is called upon and explained expertly towards finding out what the Psalms actually say.

In the second place no modern commentary on the Psalms can fail to concern itself with the problem of psalm-types, such as Gunkel elaborated, and the quest to discover the setting of these various types in ancient Israel's life and worship. In this we can see how ineffectual was the earlier pre-occupation of commentators with questions of the date of individual psalms on the assumption that each one had arisen out of some specific historical occasion. Both in a brief introductory essay and in the commentary on each psalm Anderson discusses the category to which each psalm belongs and the characteristic features, idioms and purpose which belong to each type. Thirdly, no study of the Psalms can dispense with a reconstruction of the basic features of Israel's worship, with its festivals, rites and theological themes. The role played by the king in worship, the ideas which it expressed and the participation of the individual in its ceremonies all have a strong relevance to the Psalms. On this aspect Anderson well recognises the long traditions which underlie our extant compositions with conventions of speech, allusive idioms and the expertise of professional psalm-writers which made it possible for specific psalms to be accommodated to a great many general situations. This especially concerns the individual laments where no firm consensus exists among scholars about the occasions of distress which relate to their use, whether of sickness, accusations of crime, the attacks of personal enemies or fear of witchcraft and sorcery. No one view can explain all the varied pleas and appeals which such psalms contain.

All in all these volumes are thoroughly to be commended for the way in which they sift a vast heap of scholarly grain, and present a sound and balanced assessment of the meaning of the Psalms. By combining clarity with an openness to more than one kind of interpretation they serve the student extremely well, and can hardly fail to arouse further thought and devotion centred on the Old Testament Psalms.

R. E. CLEMENTS.

Calvin's New Testament Commentaries. By T. H. L. Parker. London S.C.M. Pp. xiii, 208. £3.50.

This careful but expensive book will be of considerable interest to all those seriously interested in Calvin studies

The first two chapters deal with the literary history of Calvin's commentaries and the writing of commentaries by other reformers of his period. Then chapters follow on Calvin's method of interpretation, his views about the Biblical canon, his attitude to other expositors, both contemporaries and predecessors, and, finally, two chapters on the Greek and Latin texts upon which he based his work. The book concludes with rather more than 40 pages of bibliography dealing both with the Reformation period and later works concerned with matters touched on in the text.

A number of the points which Dr. Parker makes in passing are of very general interest. For example, he suggests (p. 3) that the production of his commentaries was far more congenial to John Calvin than his work as a busy city pastor; that (p. 50), his approach to his New Testament commentaries was closely modelled on his first published work, a commentary to Seneca's *De Clementia*; that (p. 73) his test of canonicity was not apostolic authorship but a judgment on whether the Holy Spirit spoke through the authors. It was convenient, to say the least, that he seems to have concluded that this was the case with the 27 works composing the traditional canon!

Whatever John Calvin's desires after the secluded life of a scholar, however, as Dr. Parker points out, his work was rooted *both* in the life of the Apostolic Church *and* in the needs of the Reformation churches (p. 91): "The unrelieved tension between history and contemporaneity is reflected in Calvin's commentaries in the way that the scene continually shifts from the first to the 16th century, from the third person to the first person plural and back again. We almost forget which century we are in; we hardly know whether the participants are *they* or *we*."

This is a careful, scholarly book which fills a gap in Calvin studies.
B. R. WHITE.

The Religious Experience of Mankind. Ninian Smart, London. 733 pages. 75p.

This is the Fontana Library edition of a book first published in New York in 1969. At seventy-five pence it is remarkably good value for money.

Professor Ninian Smart, Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster, is a recognised authority on the philosophical and comparative study of religions. The erudition embodied in his book is enormous but throughout he wears his learning lightly. He tells his story in a style which is lucid and readable. For both the student and the general reader this is an excellent introduction to comparative religion. It might be found particularly useful in sixth forms where there is, I understand, a great interest in this subject. To undergraduates it will be invaluable. Ministers of Religion and others will find it a most useful reference book.

The author reviews the development of religion from its earliest known forms up to its most sophisticated. He shows the influence which religions have had upon each other. At the end of the book he discusses the contemporary encounter between humanism and religious belief and offers some opinions on the shape of things to come.

In the past developments within religion have often been unpredictable. There is little reason to suppose that this will not be true in the future. The author notes that "religions are moving together but they are also diversifying at the edges". He is confident that the story of mankind's religious experience is not drawing to its close but opening up into wider dimensions.

W. D. HUDSON.