

## IN THE STUDY

Study of Old Testament prophecy has of late betrayed a certain weariness. Redaction critical questions still provide work for idle hands and issues of speech form and literary genre are always good for a run round the paddock. Yet the total enterprise has more and more frequently invited comparison with a long-running police investigation, with house to house enquiries being reduplicated for the fifteenth time even though there are no fresh questions to ask. Contemporary sociological preoccupations have already affected diverse areas of Old Testament study. That they will increasingly influence understanding of Israelite prophecy is scarcely to be doubted. The immediate question is whether a book<sup>1</sup> emanating from Yale Divinity School offers the creatively fresh perspective that is needed.

Robert Wilson's pilgrimage is lucid and logical. He seeks to get a handle on the social dimensions of prophecy in terms of role, range, rooting. He begins with anthropological study of prophecy in modern societies, moves backwards to survey the comparative evidence on prophecy in the ancient Near East, and forwards/sideways to plot prophecy in Israel and Judah. A cautious skeletal history of Old Testament prophecy is finally offered.

The anthropological foray systematises and summarises a vast complexity of investigation and debate in an area where most of us can only listen warily and respectfully. It is claimed that the "prophet" is essentially an intermediary, related to a support group in society which has a significant effect on his speech and behaviour and which, by its character, helps to determine whether the spearheading of social change or the maintenance of social order marks the prophetic activity. The experts will have to decide how far the evidence is being selectively slanted. Certainly there is nothing sociologically surprising about this kind of verdict.

Into the pattern thus established the ancient Near Eastern evidence fits with tolerable neatness. The Mari Letters, the neo-Assyrian and Akkadian texts, the Egyptian literature, the Ebla archive, the Zakir and Deir Alla inscriptions, are all dealt with faithfully. Of course the answers given by ancient and sometimes fragmentary texts will be affected by the questions put to them; and in this case the questions are the carry over from the initial investigation of facets of modern societies. But this is the way that hypotheses must be tested, and there is no attempt to conceal where evidence is complex and conclusion precarious. Dr Wilson emerges with a frame, confirmed and still intact, which can then be applied to the prophetic strands of the Old Testament.

Does the frame at this point prove to be a Procrustean bed? I think not. Indeed the picture that emerges is in very many respects a familiar one - partly because sociology is not immune from the partial tendency of many a latecomer to betray an expertise in dignifying the obvious. The distinction between Ephraimite and Judaeian prophecy, the interrelationship of prophetic word and action with historical situation and social configuration, the prophet as spokesman for the tradition and against the tradition, the significance of the "Mosaic" prophet - these are the stuff of contemporary understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* by R. R. Wilson, Fortress Press. \$15.95. 1980.

Yet this is not to say that the Wilson reconstruction is simply the mixture as before. A fresh frame produces a fresh total picture in which familiar detail is overmatched by a new balance, a sharper definition, a different mix of light and shade. Of course, the blurred edges remain. So little is known about Judaeae prophecy. So much still hinges on uncertain verdicts about the extent of Deuteronomistic influence or the precise role in prophetic developments of that tantalising variable, crucial in every equation, the Levites. Yet a book as comprehensive in scope and as replete with insight as this should prove unusually fruitful, even if it does not (and does not pretend to) tell the whole truth about Israelite prophecy.

How far will sociology provide the jumping off ground for creative biblical work in the immediate future? The question is provoked not only by Robert Wilson's research but by the familiar endeavours of a Gottwald in relation to the Old Testament and a Gager, a Malherbe, or a Theissen in relation to the New. It may be too early for the passing of confident judgments. But whenever the verdict is rendered, a recent study of I Peter<sup>2</sup> must find a place in the evidence tabled.

It is sub-titled, with rare precision, "A Sociological Exegesis of I Peter, its situation and strategy". It moves with rare verve through a part of the New Testament corpus scarcely notorious in this generation for commentaries in English of enduring significance. It asks with rare insight questions to which the text leaps to respond. Its author is a master of the background literature who has already established himself in the field of I Peter.

An interdisciplinary approach to the biblical text has obvious putative merits. The exegetical engagement anchors enquiry in a literary reality which exerts its own controls. The sociological angle of approach drives enquiry to grapple with the social factors that partly condition the text and also alerts the interpreter to the structure of social relationships common to author and recipients and to the social impact the text is designed to make. What then does the doubleheaded probe reveal?

I Peter is concerned with the interaction of Christians and society. It addresses communities of Asia Minor north of the Taurus range which are heavily composed of resident aliens and temporary strangers who have suffered displacement and ache to belong; the homeless seeking a home. They are targets of social suspicion and harassment because of their sectarian exclusiveness, and they are in danger of becoming demoralised. To them the letter comes from Rome to renew their internal communal identity and cohesion. It stresses that their distinctiveness is the necessary precondition of their missionary witness. It assures them of their status before God and of the sense of "belonging" that this affords, not least with the suffering Christ. It points up the internal solidarity which their manner of common life must foster and express. It dignifies them as none other than the household of God.

This imagery of the "household" has more than a narrowly theological connotation. It draws a good deal of its power from its existing importance as the carrier of significance for a wide

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2 *A Home for the Homeless* by John H. Elliott. S.C.M. Press. £15. 1982.

and variegated range of expressions of communal life. In Christian terms also, it was the household which provided the socioreligious focus of missionary expansion. Small wonder then that it offered the fruitful context for an elaboration of roles, relationships and responsibilities which played a crucial part in shaping Christian identity and self-understanding. Given the disintegrating pressures bruising the rival Christian communities of Asia Minor in the fourth quarter of the first century and summoning them to social conformity and cultural assimilation, it is not surprising that the author of I Peter should place such weight on a powerful reassertion of distinctive community in "household" terms. The presence of the household code provides for the pointed sketch of that style of communal living which both unites its Christian practitioners and contrasts them with pagan society.

Inevitably the case presented is far from cast-iron. Not all the detailed arguments and conclusions convince. This master key does not turn in every lock. So much depends upon the starting point and the initial stance adopted. If you start where Elliott bids you locate yourself, at the tense junction of *oikos* and *paroikoi*, then you need not expect to emerge with the discovery of a baptismal sermon or the outlines of a liturgy. In the end, a biblical writing arguably conceals its manysidedness from those who insist on approaching it from only one direction.

The path we are here asked to take is however an unusually important one, and the view from it particularly compulsive. It may now be time to bid farewell to theories of official persecution as the context of this "Petrine" letter. It is certainly time to stop the persistent reading of it through the lens of the letter to the Hebrews as a reminder to earthly pilgrims of their true home in heaven. And it is probably time to cease the rooting of Christian household codes in doubtfully relevant Stoic precursors. At all these points and more, Dr Elliott is on the side of the angels - or (more modestly) has my vote.

Sociological exegesis is still very much the exception rather than the rule. Meanwhile, most commentary work runs along wellworn tracks. A contemporary fullscale treatment of Matthew's Gospel has for long been missing. Here at last it is provided<sup>3</sup>, all 550 pages of it. The format is predictable: introductory discussion of the usual issues, bibliography, translation and commentary. The commentary on an English text assumes a recognition of Greek but transliterates Hebrew words. It divides the Gospel into major blocks and sub-sections. The usual mix of overall exposition followed by detailed comment on verses is offered.

A costly investment like this cries out for close scrutiny. It raises acutely that continuing problem question as to what a commentary should aim to do. The conventional answer deals in exposure of the original meaning of the text. In the heyday of fresh linguistic knowledge, new light on the ancient world and increasing supplementary resources by way of literary deposits unearthed from the past, an air of excitement and dis-

<sup>3</sup> *The Gospel according to Matthew* by F. W. Beare. Blackwell. £20. 1981.

covery pervaded the enterprise. Now the landscape seems flatter and duller. Scholars echo or adjudicate between other scholars, and laboriously repeat the content of the Gospel record in less distinguished prose and style than that of the original. The reader emerges stuffed with antiquarian knowledge but inclined to protest that the usability of scripture remains more obscure than ever. The commentator is inclined to retort that that is someone else's problem.

It is probably no accident that most of the exceptional commentaries that betray a measure of enduring greatness - Barth on Romans, Bultmann on John - come from expositors who have "engaged" the text rather than explored it. Yet the way ahead remains debatable, as a Brevard Child on Exodus takes one direction and the Catholic/Protestant N. T. Kommentar strikes out on another. Meanwhile Francis Beare sticks firmly to traditional paths, assumes Matthaean dependence on Mark and Q, dates the Gospel at the end of the first century and concentrates, in terms of redaction criticism, on what Matthew was saying and meaning in the context of his own time.

I have no quarrel with a commentator who states what he intends to do and then does it. The obvious place for establishing the ground rules is the "introductory" discussion; and here Beare tells us what we need to know of his understanding and intent. It is when we enter the body of the commentary that unease begins to surface. On the one hand, we meet the occasional forays into application for today. These smack of subjective and even superficial intrusion for which no proper groundwork has been laid. On the other hand, and much more seriously, the matter of the historical authenticity of what purports to be Jesus material emerges as an irritant forcing obsessive scratching.

This phenomenon seems to be one of the running sores of current biblical exposition. Some claimed to detect that Howard Marshall, in his recent *magnum opus* on Luke, kept putting an anxious finger on the commentary scales in order to tilt the balance in favour of historicity. Beare constantly puts a foot on them to ensure a reverse movement. There is the air of a man defending a beleaguered castle. The adjectives multiply: "incredible" - "impossible" - "implausible" - "inconceivable"; and once the Passion narrative is reached the pace if anything quickens: nothing but a fabrication - obviously fictional - hostile invention - one of the most extravagant inventions - a Christian fabrication - completely incredible. That all this assists exposition may be doubted.

The strength of this commentary lies in quite other directions. It is good on textual and linguistic issues. It is painstaking in its comparison of the Matthaean with the Markan text - though I would have accepted the sacrifice of some of this detail for a more comprehensive attention to Old Testament background and allusion. It is weighty on the teaching of Jesus - though the treatment of the parables sometimes verges on the flat and wooden. But in the end I find myself concluding that most potential readers will do as well if not better with Benedict Green's slim commentary at a fraction of the price.

The movement from Beare to Gowan<sup>4</sup> is a movement from the study to the pulpit. Does scholarship and commentary work really assist preaching today? The verdict rendered is an optimistic one. The Old Testament can indeed be properly and effectively proclaimed. Among the necessary preconditions is a respectful attention to the insights and perspectives afforded by contemporary critical approaches. The preferred candidates are traditio-historical criticism and what Gowan calls form criticism - though a good deal of what he here describes may be more generally identifiable as literary or genre criticism. The literary genres to which detailed attention is given are history, saga, short story, law, wisdom, prophecy. Each is discussed and exemplified. Each is sermonically illustrated.

This is very much the received wisdom of our time. Yet, on the basis of confessedly limited experience, I would judge that it is light years ahead of what is actually going on in the modern pulpit. It further commands a hearing because it is worked out and worked through with unusual detail and comprehensiveness to the point of actual sermons preached. The question is whether it convinces.

Within limits, an affirmative answer can be returned. The section on law is outstanding in its helpfulness. The section on prophecy is noteworthy. The bridge offered between text and congregation, in the shape of a continuing history of a continuing People, will certainly carry some of the freight that has to be shifted. The relaxed refusal to force the whole of the Old Testament through a christological funnel before judging it homiletically usable has obvious merit.

Yet familiar questions remain. From the many that might be tabled, let me advance two. What problems are raised if and when the sermon that emerges from this approach to the Old Testament smacks of the trivial, the obvious, the jejune, offering a "message" that really does not need scripture to bring it to birth or - alternatively and even more searchingly - that arises fairly clearly from the New Testament itself? On what grounds then does the preacher drag in the Old Testament at all, saddling himself on the way with all the additional problems thus created? This is a specific aspect of the broader question of the relationship between Old Testament and New. And it is not solved by generalised references to taking the canon seriously.

Secondly, how far has the homiletical enterprise been fudged by the setting of all preaching under the rubric of the "Word of God", when that rubric itself is related to classical prophecy in a way that it is not related to other genres in the biblical material? Put differently, does preaching have to be redefined - or do we have to take much more seriously the possibility that parts of the Bible do not constitute preaching material - or is there a third possibility? That a reading of Gowan provokes these and other questions may be counted an unplanned bonus.

In the last thirty years the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer have been put through a theological meat grinder. Papers are read; lectures are delivered; dissertations are submitted; congresses travail. Over it all has presided, with rare devotion,

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<sup>4</sup> *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit* by Donald E. Gowan. T & T Clark. £4.50. 1981.

the keeper of the keys, Eberhard Bethge. Since Bonhoeffer's life and thinking were cut short in midstream, since he was no systematiser, since not a little of his writing was done "on the run", it has remained open season for unfettered interpretation. Gradually, however, judicious sanity has re-asserted itself; and as the more substantial surveys of Bethge and Feil, Ott and Mayer, Dumas and Rasmussen, have emerged, something like the boundaries of consensus have been identified. It was arguably, then, a good time to take stock and gather in a provisional harvest; and we turn to this latest composite survey<sup>5</sup> with expectation.

It is perhaps on the issue of transcendence that Bonhoeffer speaks most powerfully to contemporary theology. At this point his undeviating polemic against both metaphysical and spatial concepts of the transcendence of God is matched by an equally unyielding refusal to go the way of dialectical theology or of this-worldly secularism. Singlemindedly he plots transcendence by way of the Lutheran *pro me*, the "haveability" of God.

Now all this has nothing to do with academic cartwheels; not in a theology which always presses towards concreteness. The fact is that a false understanding of God, whether in terms otherworldly or secularist, involves a false understanding of the world. The common factor, the focus, the centre, is Christ. It is his being for others that defines transcendence. It is he who constitutes the unbreakable unity between the reality of God and the reality of the world. The visibility of this point of contact is the church. Yet Christ is the hidden centre and boundary of all reality, structuring the meaning underlying the whole historical process. If christology is for Bonhoeffer the *cantus firmus*, then the understanding of world is a major contrapuntal theme.

What does this mean for ethics? Clearly it negates thinking in two spheres. Ethics is at heart a matter of correspondence with christological reality, a living expression of the command of God *in situ*, the "formation" of Christ in the world. Yet if principles and casuistry are alike ruled out, the ethical map is not left entirely bereft of compass bearings. There are the mandates (government, marriage and family, culture/labour, church) which provide the ordered framework structuring ethical expression. There is the distinction between the penultimate and the ultimate. There is the definition of responsible life in terms of deputyship. The trouble with all Bonhoeffer's continuing stabs after satisfying argument and expression is that most of the major questions to be asked in this area remain doubtfully answered. Inevitably we turn to his own life and action - or perhaps secondarily to the limited discussion of particular ethical issues that he provides. Opinions will differ as to the real light thus shed. Here perhaps most obviously he seems circumscribed by his own cultural background and the particular complexities of his time.

Such broad comment is particularly provoked by essays contributed by Feil and Mayer, Geoffrey Kelly and James Laney - thought-provoking discussions all. This book also contains a

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5 *A Bonhoeffer Legacy* ed. A. J. Klassen. Eerdmans. £10.50. 1981.

delicate and perceptive brief study on The Role of the "Enemy" in Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought, by William Peck. For the rest, it is a collection of run of the mill contributions, some sadly dated - with a padding of the tired trivia of postgraduate studies. The total result does Bonhoeffer small honour.

Honour is however to be found nearer home. W. A. Whitehouse has been and remains one of the theological adornments of English Congregationalism, largely content to blush unseen while more extrovert figures rushed headlong into print. Thirty years ago, he gave us a slim volume entitled *Christian Faith and the Scientific Attitude* in which his mathematical and scientific background was doughtily deployed in the service of the Gospel; and he returned to the theme, in even slimmer lecture form in 1960, in *Order, Goodness, Glory*. For the rest, we are left with the occasional article or essay. It is a judicious selection of these<sup>6</sup> that is currently on offer.

Such compilations from the attic are not often successful. This one succeeds, partly because the doctrines of creation and providence, understood in a scientific era from a christological centre, were the flame to which like a fascinated moth Whitehouse constantly returned. He has not been a systematic builder rearing impressive theological edifices, much more a pick and shovel man, with an unmatched eye for a potentially valuable seam of ore and a willingness to go on hacking away at it, probing, scrutinising, grading. The title of this book has a Whitehousian precision, pinpointing exactly its dominating note.

Of its two major sections, the first relates to the Church Dogmatics of Karl Barth, the second ranges over the great themes of creation, nature, fulfilment. Inevitably, the dialogue with Barth has a slightly dated air - though time cannot dim the sense of indebtedness to one who, in the post-war years, struggled with the *Dogmatics* in German and sensitively and perceptively reported on the state of play. It is however in the more eclectic section that the gold is to be found. The biblical theology, the robust christology, the measured style - these scarcely chime in with the mood of our time. Nor does the preference for hints and questions rather than hypotheses and answers. Yet the themes are among those that popular theology has for too long either bypassed completely or slickly and superficially pigeonholed. Those most concerned with the theological growing points of tomorrow will not despise this slender representation of the best of the Free Church theological heritage.

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6 *The Authority of Grace* by W. A. Whitehouse. T & T Clark. £4.95. 1981.