

THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL, by Theodore C. Vriezen. Translated by Hubert Hoskins. *Lutterworth Press*, London, 1967. 328 pp. 45s.

THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL, by Henry Renckens, S.J. Translated by N. D. Smith. *Sheed and Ward*, London, 1967. 370 pp. 37s. 6d.

The enormous advances made in Old Testament studies since the period before the last war have justified radically new examinations of the stock subjects of biblical scholarship. The religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Hebrews must be at the centre of such studies. Fortunately, there has already been a whole generation of reliable new scholarship, and the dust is beginning to settle. Books such as these, by sound and leading scholars, can be used with confidence.

Professor Vriezen's *The Religion of Ancient Israel* was first published in Holland in 1963. There are two main methods of exposition open to an author in this field: either an examination of the historical development set in the context of the growth and change within the community; or an exposition of the main themes or models by which religious faith is expressed in the spoken or written word and in worship. Professor Vriezen adopts the first of these two methods.

The foundation is laid in the first two chapters, which occupy a third of the book. The first of these chapters examines the religion of the surrounding nations in the ancient Near East, both in general and in detail. Only then is there an examination, in the following chapter, of Israel's religious life at the end of the period of the Judges, the period when we can first be confident of our knowledge.

This is an essential preliminary, for in any study of the Old Testament there is always the danger of isolating the Hebrew people from their neighbours. Students' essays frequently treat Hebrew history as a brilliantly illuminated area surrounded by impenetrable darkness. Invaders irrupt on to the stage from time to time and disappear again, or the Hebrews are taken away for a brief interval, but the main action all takes place in a bright little self-contained island, where the people seem quite

unaffected by anything outside. Quite the opposite is, in fact, the case. The Hebrew people lived on the busiest cross-roads in the world, and they were profoundly affected by their constant contact with their neighbours.

Professor Vriezen brings this out well, and it enables him to show clearly the essential difference between Israel's religion and that of her neighbours: 'Because Israel came to know Yahweh through his liberating action in history, she knew that her being and her continued existence derived from and depended on God's acts in history. Her religious ideas, therefore, were so orientated as to be neither naturalistic nor cyclical, but teleological and grounded in history' (p. 74).

The rest of the book examines this experience as it develops and comes to clearer consciousness in the course of the nation's history, until the exclusiveness and fossilization of the post-exilic legalism choked the people's religion by isolating it from the world it was meant to save: 'The eschatological hope was overlaid by men's confidence that they knew and possessed the truth. . . . To preserve what was laid down in the Torah became the only rule of life. The Law came to be identified with a pre-existent wisdom, and even with the Spirit, of God' (pp. 267f.). The experience of God's 'liberating action in history' was lost beneath 'the conservative emphasis on hierocracy and legalism'.

Professor Renckens' *The Religion of Israel*, first published in Holland in 1962, also adopts the method of historical development, but the main concern is with the relation between the mystery of God's involvement in his creation and the mystery of human response: 'In every respect except one, Israel was at the same level as the other ancient, oriental, racial groups or even below this average level. In her religion, however, she rose to a position of solitary eminence. She succeeded in reaching this

height only in spite of herself and in spite of her environment. Mysterious, dynamic forces were at work in Israel and all the persistent efforts which have been made to explain these forces have so far resulted in failure. They cannot be explained by . . . a natural predisposition on the part of the people, nor can they be elucidated by claiming that they were derived from other peoples. . . . What made Israel were forces from above' (p. 11).

The effects of these forces can be examined in the nation's beliefs and worship, and in their changing manifestations as the main influences on the nation's life passed from the monarchy to the prophetic movement, and finally to the Judaism of the post-exilic communities. Despite their dispersion, these communities formed 'a great, united, worshipping community, with Jerusalem as its place of worship' (p. 300). It is impossible to generalize about this community without at the same time falsifying it. On the one hand, 'the Jewish priestly mind diluted the content of the prophetic inheritance, by translating it into its own scholastic terms and interpreting it according to its legalistic conceptions'; on the other hand, 'Judaism conducted the prophetic flood into calm, priestly channels.

Judaism was rich in the religion and faith of the prophets, but this became crystallized in many different institutions and practices as it spread over the centuries' (pp. 308f.).

But Professor Renckens is at his most interesting when he traces the power of the prophetic themes in the life of the nation. The divine reality, transcendent yet immanent, holy and living, was intimately associated with every aspect of Israel's life, for she had been chosen by God and belonged wholly to him. This is the true ground of all social justice and effective worship, and the nation inevitably suffered whenever it denied this ground by formalism, injustice, political aspirations or mere national pride.

Both books, in their different ways, make a vital point. The religion of Israel cannot be reconstructed or even satisfactorily described, for it was inseparable from the total life of the people. It was the religion of a closely knit, worship-centred community, but precisely because of this its experiences are valuable for the worship-centred community founded by Jesus Christ. Both books succeed in making this experience more accessible.

JOSEPH RHYMER

THE EXPERIENCE OF PRIESTHOOD, edited by the Rev. Brian Passman. *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 1968. 165 pp. 25s.

This book contains: a wise and sympathetic Introduction by Archbishop Hurley, and 'essays by thirteen English-speaking priests of all ages and backgrounds', to quote the large claim made by the blurb. At the end is an essay by a consultant psychiatrist, which seems to be valueless. Of the priests' essays, the first is moderate and balanced, and reveals humility and humour. None of the others reaches the same standard, and most, not all, express frustration and disappointment. Probably the writers have not presented a correct view of themselves: there is a suggestion of hectic excitement about them which makes for imbalance. Certainly it is difficult to believe that profound unhappiness prevails among priests to the extent that this book suggests, viz. in ten out of thirteen.

One wonders what justification the editor supposed he had for the book. What he says is: 'The success of the book, *The Experience of Marriage*, prompted the idea of a similar book on the priesthood', which is a notable instance of *obscurum per obscurius*. To us the publication

seems regrettable because likely to do more harm than good.

The contributors, indeed, write with evident sincerity, and no one, certainly no fellow-priest, could fail in sympathy. Also they are usually moderate and anxious to be fair; and only rarely bitter. And there is much truth in their complaints. It is true, for instance, that the celibate state is often marked by loneliness and a sense of isolation from the mass of men. It is true, too, that presbytery life has often been difficult, that parish priests may fail to understand and trust their younger assistants; that moral theology has an unattractively legalistic aspect, especially to those who do not bear in mind the principles of interpretation tucked away in earlier pages of the manual. And there is overwhelming evidence of grave shortcomings in seminary training up to the recent past. Other features of priestly life can be burdensome. But in this book there is far too little account of the considerable changes for the better already visible.

But the reason why the issue of the book seems