

**PROPHECY IN ISRAEL** edited by David Peterson. *SPCK*. London, 1987. £3.95.

**PROPHECY AND THE PROPHETS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT** by John Sawyer. *OUP*. Oxford. 1987. £6.95.

What is a prophet? Is there some simple basic definition? On the whole each age defines a prophet after its own image. The Romantics saw them as great poets and the nineteenth century as stern moralists. Today they are seen less as great personalities than as faceless carriers of a tradition. But perhaps the main problem with the prophets is not their definition but the fact that their powerful, and often strange message from God is not heard. They are either briefly heard in inadequate snippets in the Sunday lectionary or their voice is drowned in a sea of scholarly detail. They are either tamed or ignored. So introductions which can give them a hearing are to be welcomed. Here are two.

David Peterson has edited an anthology of the best contemporary work on Prophecy in Israel. He gives us a useful map of the territory in his introduction moving from the different methods which are used to assess prophetic literature to the question of what gives a prophet his identity. So he begins with a long essay by Gunkel, translated into English here for the first time, which gives a sense of the powerful, poetic language which makes their message so compelling and strange. This is what Gunkel says about their passion: 'It is almost impossible for us reserved Nordic people, who have an inborn sense of propriety and moderation, who have been trained by the Christian religion to be gentle, and who admire the golden mean exemplified in the Greeks, to match the exuberance of this perception' (p.46). That was written in 1923, — the prophets wrote more than two thousand years earlier. So we also need historical and anthropological studies to make us aware of the distance. An essay on the cult by Mowinkel is included and one by Holladay on Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel. But, at the end, how are we to make them heard today? In a stimulating essay entitled the role of 'the prophets and the role of the church' Gene Tucker states quite baldly: 'If we cannot read the prophets, at least now and then, as if they were speaking directly to us, then we might as well give up on the rest of the Old Testament, and most of the New Testament as well, for that matter.' He then makes a good effort to show how they can speak directly to us.

In *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament*, which is part of the short Oxford Bible Series John Sawyer follows a similar pattern, by dealing with the different aspects of prophetic literature and then the message of each prophet. He covers a great deal of ground in a short space and two aspects of his approach are worth noting. First he is not only interested in what the prophets actually did or said. He wants to see how the tradition has represented them and to see how they have been understood and implemented in post-biblical times. So he tells us the big fish which saved Jonah was a 'friendly homely fish', and the rabbis added some details to the story; there was a pearl in the belly of the fish to give poor Jonah some light! (p.114). Secondly, Sawyer, having made some general points with each prophet, then takes an important text from each book and offers a brief study of it. And he, too, wants to end his book with an attempt to show how each age has made the prophetic message alive in their own day. He looks at both Christianity and Judaism, but not content to make sure the message remains at a safe distance hundreds or thousands of years ago, he traces the way they have been interpreted from Ben Kosiba, to Shabbetai Zevi, down to Zionism and finally to those who are giving so much trouble today, the liberation theologians. He ends the book with this prophetic reminder 'The visions of the Old Testament prophets have an extraordinary relevance. Anyone interested in prophecy and fulfilment ... cannot afford to turn a blind eye to these most recent stages in the history of interpretation.' (143).

Both of these books can be recommended to anyone who wants some help in hearing what the prophets have to say and both have the added advantage of being quite cheap.

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