

RESURRECTION: NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS AND CONTEMPORARY REFLECTION by Pheme Perkins. *Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1984. 504pp.*

This scholarly, lively, attractively written and handsomely produced volume disappoints only in the one respect that it is lop-sided. The sub-title leads one to expect an equal treatment of New Testament witness and contemporary reflection, but this is not the case. The first is examined in great detail, occupying ten chapters (eleven if that on Second Century Christianity is included) and three hundred and ninety pages, while the second is dealt with in two concluding chapters and some sixty pages. That is by the author's design. She describes herself as primarily an exegete, but as one whose aim is not simply to add to exegetical studies, but to aid their digestion by the larger community both of believers and unbelievers, and to help clarify the subject in relation to contemporary philosophy and theology. But, as she herself admits, this latter aim really requires another book.

The inevitably complex investigation of the New Testament statements on resurrection is exceedingly well done. It could perhaps be said to be the best of its kind available in summarising critical analysis of the subject, and in demonstrating it at work in such a way that the intelligent non-expert can see what is at stake. The author is master of the secondary literature—and it is a peculiar feature of this subject that that literature has grown in a few decades from almost nothing to vast proportions—and she is able to make the reader aware of it without being throttled by it. The emergence of the concept and imagery of resurrection in first century Judaism, where they had a secondary place, is traced with skill. Then—and this constitutes the greater part of the book—their place in the New Testament, where they move into the centre, is investigated in the varied types of utterance involved—kerygmatic and liturgical formulae, statements made in the service of doctrinal or ethical instruction, narratives of the empty tomb, narratives of resurrection appearances. The presentation in each of the gospels is examined with appreciation of the differences, and of those differences as related to the distinctive theological stance of each gospel. The analysis and exegesis here are seldom purely descriptive, but aim to show the text as evidence of the creative power of the imagery for Christian thought in a wide variety of circumstances, and 'resurrection' as a catalyst of other theological themes. Not all symbols or aspects of symbols are retained in the same degree, or are equally absorbed into the Christian consciousness. Thus, from an origin in apocalyptic with its end-of-the-world type of thinking resurrection, through its application to whatever different New Testament writers understood by the gospel of Christ, becomes attached to, and formative of, cosmology or the doctrine of creation, salvation or divine renewal of the world, and ethics or newness of living. Its original attachment to the judgement, even if retained, takes second place.

It is with this dynamic aspect of resurrection in mind, and its character of supplying what she calls the 'founding language' of the Christian tradition, that the author passes from New Testament analysis to a consideration of the place of resurrection in contemporary thought. This is weak by comparison. This is not to say that it is at any point superficial. What is said is almost always penetrating and suggestive. Nor is it a serious limitation that the discussion is conducted almost exclusively with reference to Roman Catholic theologians. It is simply that it is far too brief for its purpose, and that in two respects. Firstly, so much has happened in and to the Christian tradition since the second century, not least in the sphere of eschatology, that more of it has to be taken into account if one is to explain how Christians have come to think as they now think, with resurrection largely shorn of its dynamic and retained as a kind of appendix or left-over. Secondly, so much has happened to the philosophical mind of the West, not least with regard to its thought about creation, space and time, that the relevance and applicability of freshly discovered biblical insights, however illuminating they may be thought to be, can only be argued for at very considerable length and with very considerable toughness.

C.F. EVANS