

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

DEAR FATHER EDITOR,

Will you allow me to make some observations about Fr Joseph Bourke's stimulating article on *The Unity of the Old Testament* in your July–August number? I am not directly concerned with the substance of the article, in which Fr Bourke admirably employs all the authority of modern scholarship to support the thoroughly traditional view that the essential nucleus of the Old Testament is God's two-fold covenant, with Israel on Sinai and with David on Sion.

What I would like to question here is the advice which Fr Bourke gives 'those who are embarking on serious and constructive reading of the Old Testament'. When such a person asks where he should begin, he should be told 'emphatically not at the beginning'. He should begin with the two nuclear points, the two covenants just referred to. But surely it is not the natural procedure to begin the study of any subject at the heart of the matter. No one would suggest that *mensa, mensa, mensam*, is the nucleus of the Latin language, but that is where most of us began our study of it. We usually begin books, even those we intend to read seriously and constructively, at the beginning, with the Introduction and Chapter 1, without supposing that the author will there reveal to us straight away the point of his story or the kernel of his lesson.

Why should it be different with the Old Testament? The beginner who is as yet quite unfamiliar with it will not, I think, be well served by being set *in medias res* on Sinai and on Sion. He must be led there slowly, not transported by angels like the body of St Catherine.

It seems to me that the beginner must begin by making himself familiar, in a general and confessedly superficial way with the Old Testament as a whole. That is to say, he must read it through from beginning to end—not necessarily of course keeping rigidly to the present order of books—at least two or three times, before he is ready to appreciate Fr Bourke's suggested course of study which works out from the nucleus.

This preparatory work clearly takes a long time, anything from three to five years I should say. It also imposes on the student a more or less continuous suspension of judgment, a willingness to keep on reading without always understanding very much of what he reads, especially at the beginning. And it requires an openness of mind and of sympathy to the strange and very different worlds of the sacred writers.

I do not differ from Fr Bourke, if what he is suggesting is that a

course of instruction in the Old Testament should begin with the covenant nucleus. But I think it important to bear in mind that pupils will not profit as much as they might from such a course, if they have not already begun to prepare themselves for it by beginning and beginning again—at the beginning.

Yours sincerely,

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

FR BOURKE WRITES:

'I feel that the difference between the Old Testament and a Latin grammar is more profound, more immediately important, and more far-reaching in its consequences for Bible study than Fr Hill apparently supposes. I was *not* suggesting a course of instruction. I was trying to explain how the tangled complex of traditions which we call the Old Testament accumulated over the centuries, and what effect this ought to have on our study of it. Only in the most superficial sense can the Old Testament be regarded as "a book" at all or studied as such. And why any student should be condemned to a preliminary sentence of three to five years' enforced superficiality, involving "a more or less continuous suspension of judgment", I cannot imagine.'

BOOKS RECEIVED

- Alcun Club*. R. C. D. Jasper: The Position of the Celebrant at the Eucharist, 2s. 6d.
A. & C. Black. R. A. Rabinowicz: The Land and People of Israel, 7s. 6d.
Bles. J. Maritain: The Degrees of Knowledge, 50s.
Bloud & Gay. L. Villette: Foi et Sacrement.
Burns, Oates. R. Benson: Come Rack, Come Rope (Universe Books), 3s. 6d.; L. Cristiani: Heresies and Heretics, J. Lécuyer: What is a Priest? (Faith and Fact Books), 7s. 6d. each.
Cambridge University Press. B. Tierney: Medieval Poor Law, 30s.; J. Gill, s.j.: The Council of Florence, 47s. 6d.
Challoner Publications. E. Flicoteaux: Our Lady in the Liturgy, 7s. 6d.
Geoffrey Chapman. M. Day: The Communication of Conviction, 2s. 6d.; R. Voillaume: Abodes of God, 3s. 6d.; J. Guittou: The Modernity of St Augustine, 7s. 6d.
Clonmore & Reynolds. M. Raymond: You, 21s.
Desclee. A. Valensin, s.j.: Joy in the Faith, \$4.00; A. Tanqueray: A Manual of Dogmatic Theology, \$9.75.
Gill. (ed.) K. Macnamara: Mother of the Redeemer, 25s.
Gollancz. C. Levi: Words are Stones, 16s.
Harvill Press. D. Attwater: St John Chrysostom, 18s.
B. Herder. A. S. Perret, O.P.: Towards our Father's House, 18s. 6d.
Liturgical Press. Our Parish Prays and Sings, 30s.
Macmillan, N.Y. L. M. Regis, O.P.: Epistemology, 45s. 6d.
O.U.P. P. Tillich: Theology of Culture, 18s.
Routledge & Kegan Paul. E. Neumann: Art and the Creative Unconscious, 25s.; D. T. Suzuki: Zen and Japanese Culture, 55s.; R. Ridolfi: The Life of Girolamo Savonarola, 35s.
Sands. S.C.M.: Storm out of Cornwall, 15s.
S.C.M. Press. E. Routley: Church Music and Theology, 8s. 6d.; G. A. F. Knight: A Christian Theology of the Old Testament, 30s.
Neville Spearman. E. Borneman: Tomorrow is Now, 15s.
Verlag Ars Sacra. (tr.) O. Karrer: Neues Testament.
Vrin. G. Gottier: L'Athéisme du jeune Marx.