

HEBREW MYTH AND CHRISTIAN GOSPEL, by Thomas Fawcett. *SCM Press*, London, 1973. £3.75.

If myth were not such a loaded word few would dispute that there is a great deal of it in the New Testament. As it is, apparently mythical elements are often an embarrassment to modern Christians, and scholars have done us the service of delineating such traits, which can then be either eliminated or translated in existentialist or such-like categories, so that we are left with a purely historical Jesus.

Thomas Fawcett, however, does not want to follow that example. His reason is not that he wishes to hold on to the traditionalist view that everything in the Bible is literally and historically true. In a sense he believes in the myth, in its power, usefulness and even essential function in the preaching of the Gospel. Accordingly, instead of wanting to disparage the existence of mythical elements in the New Testament he sets out resolutely to uncover as many of these elements as he can possibly find. They are not watered down to remnants of an outdated world-view, but regarded as intrinsic parts of the proclamation of the Gospel. They are brought together in four groups, accounting for the main part of the book—by far the duller part, unfortunately. The subject is, of course, too vast to allow for adequate treatment in a work of this size, and what is meant as exegesis inevitably turns into some kind of encyclopaedic summary.

This has been preceded by a long, interesting, and lucidly written introduction, discussing the opinions of modern scholars on myth and the evaluation of religion. Reductionist views are rejected as well as ones regarding mythological thinking as only a stage in the evolutionary process towards an emancipated consciousness. Myth ought not to be contrasted with knowledge of the real facts and history. Rather, the two are interwoven. Mythological thinking is not the working of a primitive kind of mind, but a certain manner of apprehending the world through symbols, in sacred history. Only in this manner are we able to perceive the hand of God in the events of life. Thus Christians mythicised Jesus in order to bring out the transcendental meaning of his life, while on the other hand they saw in him the actualisation of the hopes embodied in the mythology which they had inherited from their religious past.

Although this introductory chapter is the

more remarkable part of the study, it is at the same time the main cause of its weakness, constituting as it does the very same trap in which all the other theories about myth were caught. For it leads to an *a priori* formulation of a metaphysical view which is then read into the source material, which can no longer speak for itself (myth, incidentally, means: that which speaks for itself). Behind the author's positive appreciation of myth we may detect a dualistic view that speaks of things and God as two separate realms, one accessible by ordinary language and the other not. Myth is then seen as a special kind of language which is used in the perception of the realm of the spirit.

This strange split between thought and language seems the crucial objection to Fawcett's thesis, and from it others spring. Most noticeably, there seems to be an inadequate appreciation of the New Testament's intrinsic relationship to the whole body of Jewish literature. At least implicitly, the author would seem to suggest that the Old Testament narratives are used so as to express the Christian experience. Surely, the presence of Old Testament mythology in the gospels means more than the availability of a vehicle, a means of expression? Is it not rather a reality from whence the New Testament departs, the religious identity of Israel into which Jesus enters and which he opens into the reality now known as the Church? In the Old Testament narratives we encounter a kind of experience in which existence is enclosed, imprisoned in the perpetual cycle of life and death, sin and outrageous punishment, a cycle in which our beginning is our end. If this is what we call myth, then myth also embodies frustration and puzzlement. For man knows that he knows and loves, and lives the life of immortals, but he also knows that he has to die and to return to his beginning.

The reality of Jesus has to be understood not as something that can be taken by itself, but as something that belongs to the tension within a life dominated by the myth. This is the unredeemed reality which the Christian sees fulfilled in Jesus and which he has to experience from within before the meaning of the New Testament can be grasped.

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HELL AND THE VICTORIANS. A study of the nineteenth-century theological controversies concerning eternal punishment and the future life, by Geoffrey Rowell. *Clarendon Press*, Oxford, 1974. 242 pp. £4.85.

Something happened to hell during the nineteenth century. Mr. Gladstone, looking back in 1898, could say that the doctrine had

been 'relegated . . . to the far-off corners of the Christian mind . . . there to sleep in deep shadow as a thing needless in our enlightened