

PROPHETS II—EZEKIEL, by F. McDonagh; MINOR PROPHETS, by H. Swanston; DANIEL, by B. Robinson. 184 pp. £1.15.

HISTORIES II—JOSHUA, 1 & 2 CHRONICLES, EZRA AND NEHEMIAH, 1 & 2 MACCABEES, by H. Swanston. 215 pp. £1.30.

PSALMS AND WISDOM—PSALMS, by L. Johnston; JOB, PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, SIRACH, WISDOM, by M. Smith. 248 pp. £1.45.

(*Scripture Discussion Commentaries* 4, 5 and 6 respectively; edited by Laurence Bright O.P. Sheed and Ward London. 1972.)

There has long been a need for scripture commentaries which are informative, readable and provocative. The Discussion Commentaries set out to be just this—and in a large measure succeed. Their general form is not wholly new: each biblical book or collection of related books is prefaced by a short introduction, commented on in often substantial sections and interspersed with questions designed to relate the text to the readers' own world and experience. The radical feature of the series is its strong community and 'political' sense. Unlike many similarly structured works which place the emphasis on private study and meditation, these commentaries are intended for group study and discussion. The questions lift Bible study out of the too familiar concentration on personal spirituality, an approach which has often extorted a quite superficial meaning from the texts and has ignored their particularity. To consider such questions as 'Should the name "prophet" be reserved to people who have something to say about world issues rather than purely religious ones? On which side of the line would Ezekiel stand?' or 'What are we to think of Nehemiah's condemnation of marriage between persons of mixed race?' is to recapture the political and social character of the scriptures. The spiritualizing of the shorter commentary and the scholarly attention to textual detail of the longer commentary have both deprived the text of its essentially provocative nature. The editor's hope that the Discussion Commentaries might be used with sixth forms, as well as with parish groups, is one example (albeit somewhat *recherché*) of how the scriptures can be returned to the marketplace in which the challenge and scandal of their message was first felt. The questions or topics for discussion are of uneven quality but their value lies as much in their pointing an approach to the texts as in their specific content.

Few commentaries are quite as readable as these. The contributors have been selected not only as competent exegetes but as competent writers. Technical display is avoided, the indispensable Hebrew words are always explained, the varied styles are clear and

direct. Swanston has handled the narrative line of *Joshua* very ably and Robinson has provided a neat, if terse, guide through the tangled Maccabean background of *Daniel*. Swanston's own treatment of the Maccabean history is perhaps too racy and reads in parts like the programme synopsis of a revenge tragedy. Some might also find his treatment of *Jonah* too frivolous. But better to err in this direction than to forget that the scriptures were composed and compiled by men with a zest for life and a pungent sense of humour. The tendency in *Wisdom* and the *Minor Prophets* to *précis* or *paraphrase* passages is much more disconcerting. It might have been wiser to have abandoned the regular chapter-by-chapter commentary form here and to have emulated Johnston's brilliant thematic study of the Psalms. By sifting out and following through seven themes in the Psalms, Johnston has not only brought the Psalms to life but has produced in a hundred pages a most valuable introduction to the theology of the Old Testament. This and McDonagh's *Ezekiel* are the two most stimulating and successful commentaries of these three volumes and more than match anything else that is available for the general reader.

For such short commentaries they are remarkably informative. The writers have invariably caught the correct emphases in their introduction and made sound use of modern biblical scholarship. They present the reader with unusually up to date and accurate information, ideas and conclusions. The booklists for further reading or reference are well chosen, though it is only McDonagh in *Ezekiel* who gives a brief note on the range and value of each book, a valuable feature which might be incorporated throughout in another edition. There will always be problematic areas over which scholars will wrangle—is the 'Day of the Lord' in Amos 5, 18 an apocalyptic notion as McDonagh suggests? (*Prophets II*; p. 19)—and there will be the inevitable outdated detail—Dagon is no longer thought to be a fish-god but a grain-god (*Prophets II*; p. 94)—but these are of minor importance. The reader might be unduly

critical of the commentator's reliability when he finds the fall of Jerusalem dated to 586 in some places (e.g. *Prophets II*; p. 3; *Histories II*; p. 178) and to 587 elsewhere (e.g. *Prophets II*; p. 5; *Histories II*; p. 14) though those of us brought up on the Thiele dating (586) do still find it difficult to consistently use the probably correct Wiseman and Albright dating (587). The inconsistency ought to have been eliminated before publication. One must express surprise, however, that in the treatment of Joshua there is no more than a passing reference to the different traditions and even origins of the northern tribes and the southern tribes. The concept of a twelve-tribe unity is so ingrained in the popular consciousness that the deep division between north and south cannot be treated as an aside. The division of the kingdoms following the death of Solomon can only be adequately understood if their unity is seen to have been superficial. Johnston's reference in *Psalms* (p. 43) to the twelve-tribe amphictyony can no longer be substantiated.

The late Père de Vaux exploded Noth's hypothesis once and for all in the *Harvard Theological Review* 1971, pp. 415 ff., though we shall no doubt continue to hear of the amphictyony for a number of years to come.

It is also surprising, particularly in Commentaries of this social nature, that the theme of Yahweh's bias towards the poor and underprivileged is not drawn out to the extent that it might. Ezekiel 34 is a classic text in this respect, yet it passes unnoticed. There is, too, a failure in

the *Minor Prophets* to show the close connection between idolatry and injustice. The prophets are not levelling two unconnected charges at their society but are analysing the social corruption into its constituent and inter-related parts: idolatry both encourages and permits the injustices of the abrasive society. In the light of the prophetic critique, the sections of the Wisdom literature which emphasize worldly success and astuteness seem almost perverse. Smith passes over this too easily when he might well have included in his introduction a paragraph (at least) on Wisdom literature in the Near-East and have shown the similarities and *development* that we find in the Wisdom tradition of Israel.

A question which ought to be discussed by readers of *Joshua*, and indeed by anyone who glibly exchanges historicity for etiology, is how far we may speak of Yahweh as the God Who Acts when so few, if any, instances of his historical activity are allowed? If God's activity in history is not to be denied, the choice lies between a fundamentalism which ignores the nature of the texts and a re-evaluation of the point at which Israel experienced Yahweh in history. We shall shortly find, I believe, that Old Testament theology will concentrate less on the Exodus and Settlement traditions and more on the still more grossly political events of the fall of Samaria and Jerusalem. These three volumes, at least, of the Discussion Commentaries seem to have anticipated this.

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