

The appearance of a new book by the Warden of Keble is always an event, and one looks forward to a display of learning, intelligence and lucidity. I fear one is somewhat disappointed in the present case. What we have here is an uneven work, which would have been much more successful were it half as long.

If we try to discover what the book is about, I think we come up with the following. Viewing the scriptures from a position of extreme scepticism, Dr Nineham arrives at the conclusion, from several different directions, that they should not be taken too literally as a support for Christian belief. To be sure, this sceptical attitude is not incompatible "with a lively religious, and indeed specifically Christian faith". But yet there is a real gap between the scholar's desk and the pew, and this means that the average Christian's view of the Bible is impossibly outdated. The Warden counsels a "relaxed" approach to the Bible, which accepts it without anxiety as an ancient story (p 196).

Now, of course, it is not a reviewer's job to adjudge anyone's religious belief. My province should surely be, if a writer gives reasons for his belief or lack of it, to comment on those. And here, let it be confessed, Dr Nineham is remarkably prolific. There are arguments from psychoanalysis, sociology, biblical criticism and what else. All of them can be found in promiscuous confusion in the first chapter, which is about the difficulty of comprehending a culture so different from our own as ancient Palestine. Skip this chapter, because it is too long and terribly boring, and the book improves as it goes on.

The chapter on the Old Testament is remarkably weak, and relies mainly on scholarly views published fifty years ago. The best part of the book is undoubtedly that on the New Testament, for Dr Nineham is one of our foremost translators of

the German form-critical school, and is in his element here. His enthusiasm is infectious as he points out the contradictions and inadequacies of the New Testament writings. By any account this is brilliant writing, lucid and helpfully clarified by diagrams. Few would doubt that the form-critical school has improved immensely our understanding of the New Testament, even if there is a feeling in the air that it has run its course.

This leads us on to the main drawback of the book, which is an excessive reliance on form-critical methods alone. One of the alarming features of this school was its failure to appreciate the Semitic nature of the biblical texts. The Jews had (and have) a unique national culture, self-contained to an extraordinary degree and drawing for its development from the riches of its own treasury. Consequently generalisations about the outlook of ancient peoples, of which there are too many in this book, may not necessarily hold true with regard to the Jews. Moreover some statements Dr Nineham does make about the Jews are, at the very least, open to question. I take one at random: "the Jews had no distinct conception of impersonal laws of nature". (p 176). And one looks in vain here for an adequate discussion of the Dead Sea Scrolls or Targum Neofiti or the Rabbinical literature, all vital documents for the understanding of the Bible.

Once this one-sidedness is pointed out, there is quite a lot of real value in this book. It is a pity the theological treatment is limited to liberal Anglicanism and German Lutheranism; Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Jews will not find much enlightenment in it. But, to be fair, this was probably due to the nature of the undertaking, because the book grew out of the 1971 Cadbury Lectures in Birmingham.

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