

HISTORY OF ISRAELITE RELIGION by Georg Fohrer. S.P.C.K., London, 1973, 416 pp. £4.95.

If there is any one word which characterises the religious experiences of Israel and Judah, it is *berit*. Biblical scholars have persistently worried about the word and have chased it from one meaning to another. The regular translation 'covenant' has been found too vague and elusive. The more specific term 'contract' has led in two directions at once: contract of the type which, primarily through a ritual, establishes a quasi-blood relationship or kinship between the parties (e.g. adoption and marriage contracts), and contract of a more political than familial type in which the form is primarily one of conditions and exchanged oaths (e.g. an international treaty). More recently, however, *berit* has taken on the dual definition of 'obligation' and 'assurance'.

The strengths and weaknesses of the arguments adduced for these interpretations ought by now to have made it clear that this word behaves like most others: it has no narrowly fixed meaning but can be used with varying emphases. The fundamental and constant feature of *berit* is the 'concept of a familial relationship which entails privileges and responsibilities. 'I will be their God and they shall be my people.' (Cf. the *berit* with Abraham: 'I will give to you and your descendants all the land of Canaan and I will be your God' Gen. 17.8; and the *berit* with the Davidic kings: 'I will be his father and he shall be my son' 2 Sam. 7.14). The prophets in their repeated reminders of the kinship which Yahweh had freely established between himself and the people endeavoured to change their listeners' will and attitudes. The Deuteronomic reformers, on the other hand, were more pragmatic and concentrated on conduct in the vain belief that by legislating behaviour man could be conditioned into a filial response. The prophets emphasised the kinship dimension of *berit*; the Deuteronomic reformers and the post-Exilic leaders the dimension of very specific obligations—with the clear assurance of reward or punishment. Both movements wished to change the heart of man. Jeremiah and Ezekiel stand apart in that they see the need for a new *berit* in which God again intervenes in his creation and recreates the will ('heart'), putting his Spirit within man anew.

Professor Fohrer has chosen, surprisingly, to render *berit* as 'obligation' and 'assurance', firmly dismissing 'covenant', 'treaty' and 'contract' (p. 80). This blurs an otherwise remarkably neat and clear account of how, in his view, Mosaic Yahwism developed into post-Exilic Judaism. He argues that the *berit* at Sinai was not the quasi-blood relationship established by the cultic meal and/or the blood rites but the obligation placed upon man by Yahweh, an obligation whose small print was subsequently written

in by the Deuteronomic reformers and P. The prophets' emphasis upon the people's kinship with Yahweh recalls the personal religion of the patriarchal period and the kinship established at Sinai, not the *berit* with either Abraham or the Moses' host. Though this provides a solution to what many have seen as a problem, namely the lack of any direct reference by the eighth-century prophets to a *berit* (and yet it should be noticed that both Amos and Hosea are well aware of a body of *torah*: Amos 2.4 and Hos. 4.6), it creates too wide a gap between the faith of the prophets and that of the Deuteronomic reformers and too often does violence to the natural sense of *berit* (not least in Jer. 31.31ff.; see p. 265).

The other distinctive feature of Professor Fohrer's *History* is the role he assigns to Moses. Moses is the key religious thinker and innovator and, in all essentials, the creator of Yahwism. The successive influences of Kingship, Prophecy, Deuteronomic theology, and Eschatology (each of which is treated in considerable detail) do not so much overlay and obscure the original faith but set off its different facets. This particular thesis gives an unusual clarity to the development of Yahwism and enables Fohrer to unfold his argument chronologically as well as thematically. It is this very clarity, however, which checks the reader: after all the scholarly wrangling, can it really be so simple? Do the sources allow us to reconstruct the Yahwism of the Exodus period with the certainty that Professor Fohrer suggests? Is there not a divide between the husband-, baal-like Yahweh of Israel and the king-like Yahweh of Judah? Do the prophets and the Deuteronomic reformers restore and reinvigorate or radically reshape and redirect Yahwism? What is the influence of apocalyptic? And, the most fundamental question of all, is the religious life and thought of a people susceptible of an *historical account*?

Nonetheless, this English translation of Fohrer's *Geschichte der Israelitischen Religion* (Berlin 1968) will prove an asset to biblical studies. The major part of the work is an invaluable compilation of the results of modern research, results which are quite often contradictory. Though Fohrer's judgements are at times surprising, he usually endeavours to present all the evidence for and against his position. The bibliographies are exceptionally detailed; it is only unfortunate that they do not extend beyond 1967. This *History* is not merely the personal and forceful view of a distinguished scholar but a source book and a challenging guide to the problems that beset any would-be interpreter of Old Testament religion.

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