

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 They are not watered down to remnants of an outdated world-view, but regarded as intrinsic parts of the proclamation of the Gospel.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

and progressive age'. Geoffrey Rowell has documented this and many other changes in eschatology which took place during the Victorian period. With a lively style, impeccable scholarship and considerable theological sensitivity, Dr. Rowell has written a book which not only illuminates the often bewildering controversies of the last century but also makes a valuable contribution to present-day theological discussion.

After a chapter on the Unitarians, whose influence was strangely powerful on theologians of other traditions, Rowell offers new information and fresh insights into the controversies over *Essays and Reviews*, F. W. Farrar's *Eternal Hope*, and F. D. Maurice's *Theological Essays*. The last of these Rowell shows to be in no way reductionistic but an expression of Maurice's desire to move away from a crudely mechanistic eschatology towards more personal categories. 'For Maurice, as for Newman, the significance of eschatology was that it spoke of the final consummation of the relationship with God, in which man existed in his present life. Heaven was the acknowledgement of, and growth into, that relationship. Hell was the failure to recognise and live in terms of it; it was the failure to recognise where the true fulfilment of human nature was to be found' (p. 89).

In the chapters on the Oxford Movement and Roman Catholicism, it is Newman's greatness that most clearly emerges. Rowell speaks of the remarkable influence of *The Dream of Gerontius*, which, as Newman's friend J. M. Capes realised, put 'into shape the conviction of innumerable men and women who are as fervently Protestant as can be conceived but who find in some such relief as is here embodied, the only possible solution to the mysteries of life and death'. Constantly, both before and after 1845, we find Newman arriving at the heart of the matter: deeply aware that the NT idea of the Parousia did not corroborate the popular view of death as the moment of triumph for the righteous; emphatic that the body is not excluded from redemption and that a false 'spiritualism' must be avoided: liberating purgatory from a purely forensic interpretation and perceiving that 'The longing for Him, when thou seest Him not; The shame of self at thought of seeing Him,— Will be thy veriest, sharpest purgatory'.

Rowell argues that, while no common 'revised version' of Christian eschatology emerged during the nineteenth century, there was a widespread reaction against the vindictive silliness of Calvinist eschatology and the popular view of heaven and hell as the only alterna-

tives for future life. The notion of an 'intermediate state' became of growing importance. In some cases, this took the form of a rediscovery of the idea of purgatory; in others, it was simply the idea of a foreshortened hell. Many Protestants who rejected purgatory soon came to hold a bowdlerized view of hell, in which the suffering of the damned was provisional, purificatory and educational. The Roman Catholic writer, H. N. Oxenham, drily observed that 'now by a strange nemesis, those who would have no Purgatory will have nothing but Purgatory for anybody!' Rowell's account of the Tractarian rediscovery of purgatory is especially interesting. The theologians of the Oxford movement were concerned, of course, to stress the contrast between the primitive, Patristic, 'purificatory' view and the Roman 'penal' view, but it is interesting to note the positive assessment of the writings of Bellarmine, St. Francis de Sales, and especially St. Catherine of Genoa. Pusey went so far as to suggest that, had St. Catherine's been the popular teaching at the time of the Reformation, it was very unlikely that Article XXII (about the 'Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory') would have ever been included in Anglican formularies. Rowell's account of the correspondence on purgatory between Pusey and Newman (after his conversion) is very illuminating. Pusey sought advice and information from Newman on several matters connected with eschatology, and the fraternal and constructive tone of their exchanges, as conveyed by Rowell, is deeply moving.

In his last chapter Dr. Rowell relates the Victorian debates to present-day theology. His own view is that, while universalism can degenerate into vague optimism and culpable ignorance of the realities of good and evil, it does point to 'the final unity of love, which is the ultimate expression of God's nature and purposes; as such it can never be removed from Christian hope'. Or, as an Orthodox theologian has put it, universalism must be rejected as dogma and integrated as prayer and hope. Geoffrey Rowell is refreshingly aware of the dangers of speaking too lightly of the mysteries of life and death. That was also known, to their cost, by the men of the nineteenth century, 'who debated the issues with such agony and passion. The least we can say of them is that in their controversies they not only uncovered the confusions of the past, they also opened up perspectives of vital importance for the future'. That too, it seems to me, is the achievement of this book.

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