

# Reviews

**ESCAPING FROM FUNDAMENTALISM** by James Barr. *SCM Press* London 1984. Pp x + 195. Paperback £2.95.

Fundamentalism is a major feature of many Christian communities in the world today. The divisions which exist between people with regard to this issue are among the deepest to be found in the Church, often much deeper than those relating to denomination or even to Churchmanship. The effects of fundamentalism extend as far as the political arena and may be seen (in the United States but also closer to home) to have an effect even upon attitudes to nuclear warfare. This is a subject, then, which demands urgent concern.

In 1977, James Barr produced a major study (issued in a revised edition in 1981) called *Fundamentalism*, which gave a detailed historical survey and critical analysis of the phenomenon of Christian fundamentalism. Now Barr has given us a book of a different kind. *Escaping from Fundamentalism* is a book with a pastoral intention; it aims to provide ways forward for Christians who have become disenchanted with the fundamentalist world view and yet are unsure what viable Christian alternatives there may be.

The author, Regius Professor of Hebrew in the University of Oxford, achieved prominence in 1961 with his book *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, which exposed the fallacious nature of many of the linguistic arguments employed by a number of biblical scholars. His work since has been characterized by a determination to give close attention both to the detailed questions of Hebrew language and literature and also to the broad issues of the nature of biblical authority and the place of the Bible in the modern world. The present work is his most recent foray into this latter field.

He begins by offering an exegesis of two of the New Testament texts commonly appealed to by fundamentalists in support of their position (2 Timothy 3: 16–17 and 2 Peter 1: 20–21). He attempts to show not only that these texts have generally been misunderstood but also that the Bible itself, properly understood, points away from a fundamentalist perspective. Thus, for example, Barr argues that the characteristic biblical pattern of depiction of God is one which takes for granted the changeability and variability of the deity. He goes on to suggest that in its insistence on endowing the biblical text with qualities of perfection or inerrancy, the fundamentalist position actually distances itself from the biblical point of view and to that extent denies the content of scripture. In this way, he attempts to show that fundamentalism is unacceptable not so much because it contradicts critical methods but rather because it contradicts the material of scripture itself.

Barr argues that the fundamentalist position is generally an intellectually impoverished one, blinkered to much of the rich diversity of Church History and of contemporary doctrinal debate. With an eye to his chosen audience—those who are seeking to escape from fundamentalism—he is at pains to emphasize that it is possible to surrender a fundamentalist attitude to the Bible and still remain both orthodox and evangelical.

One may wonder how many of the people at whom this book is aimed, disillusioned fundamentalists looking for a viable Christian alternative, will actually get

to read it, given the fact (which Barr recognizes) that such alternative modes of reading the scriptures as this book represents are hardly likely to be well publicized in fundamentalist circles. One must also ask whether, in spite of Barr's attempt to communicate straightforwardly to his chosen audience, the discussion in this book may in parts be pitched too high and assume more familiarity with theological matters than is appropriate for its intended readership. Nevertheless, Barr here attempts to meet an important need and it is earnestly to be hoped that many will indeed read this book and find in it the stimulation and encouragement to explore alternatives to fundamentalism.

The book includes a list of suggestions for further reading, an index of names and subjects and an index of biblical passages.

PAUL JOYCE

**JUDAISM IN THE BEGINNING OF CHRISTIANITY** by Jacob Neusner, *SPCK*, London 1984. Pp. 112. £3.95.

Students of the New Testament are often (and quite properly) reminded that they will not understand Jesus or the emergence of Christianity until they have some grasp of Judaism. But where should they turn for guidance? Treatments of early Judaism tend either to be very technical, or to dissipate their value in polemical statements about Christian faith. Professor Neusner's introductory essay suffers from neither of these faults, and should be welcomed as a lucid and stimulating contribution.

The first chapter ('The World of Jesus' People') is a wonderfully clear treatment, which should give beginners a good grounding in what it was like to be a Jew in the first century. Teachers who use the volume will, however, wish to expand on certain points. Neusner points out that the generation which lived at the time of the Temple's destruction was not particularly sinful, despite the impression given by both the New Testament and rabbinic literature. That is a fair comment, but it leaves the student wondering why sin was ascribed to that generation. Neusner might have observed that 'sin' is sometimes used in our sources more as a theological justification of events than as a description of people's actions. Then, too, Herod is portrayed in a very positive light by Neusner, against the grain of Jewish and Christian evaluations of him. If Herod was able, why was he consistently charged with corruption? There is an answer to that question, but it should be spelled out. By the way, Neusner places Herod's death somewhat earlier than is conventional (p. 21), for reasons that he should have stated. A brief section on 'education' (23, 24) seems to combine the ordinary religious training of Jews with what more advanced study might have entailed; the result gives the impression that the generality of Jews were more scholarly than the evidence suggests. At points such as these, the book's brevity becomes a flaw. Perhaps for the same cause, 'Zealots' (pp. 26, 27) are treated as a distinct revolutionary group which existed at a period earlier than our sources suggest.

Chapter two deals with 'Sage, Priest, Messiah' as three sorts of holy men. Neusner treats them as three interacting 'ideal types' of piety. The language of 'ideal types', derived from Max Weber, is currently fashionable in the United States; they are taken to be formal patterns by which historians judge particular phenomena. The issues involved in such analysis are complex and Professor Neusner unfortunately does not explain his method at this point. The chapter on the Pharisees does, however, take account of the considerable difficulties of definition and description. In the end, it is rather inconclusive, but at least the ridiculously negative portrayal of the Pharisees by Christian scholars is roundly condemned. The fourth chapter deals with the literary and historical problems of rediscovering Hillel, the near contemporary of Jesus. Scholars will probably find this the most interesting part of the book, but I cannot imagine students being anything but perplexed. In the absence of any introduction to the literature of Judaism and the techniques used for studying it, this sudden foray into source and form criticism is far too demanding. The last chapter reverts to the normal