SOME RECENT BOOKS


This publication is designed to arrest the myopia that is all too frequently the penalty of specialisation in historical, as in other, studies. It takes the form of a symposium to which contributions are made by outstanding authorities on 'The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East'. In the circumstances a review may be largely descriptive in character.

In his preface, Julian Obermann observes that 'each lecture is unmistakably stamped with the scholarly personality of the lecturer'. He adverts to the 'sustained interest' the lectures roused in the academic community privileged to hear them. Presumably there were degrees of appreciation and approval as of qualified and unmitigated dissent at various junctures. Such is the reaction of normative human nature. The reader should not anticipate easy reading. Most of the treatments are severely scientific, avoid the colourful and emotional epithet, are sometimes extra-technical, not without pretentious but none the less 'misty' jargon; while in a few instances — which it would be impertinent to point out — dogmatism masquerades under a façade of learned agnosticism.

We proceed to outline the scope of this highly valuable and constructive survey. 'Ancient Egypt' (pp.1-34) is dealt with by Ludlow Bell — the last essay from the pen of this lamented scholar. 'Ancient Mesopotamia' is a specimen of the brilliant abilities of A.E. Speiser, also recently deceased. He has some suggestive remarks on The Idea of History in the Wisdom Literature (pp.67-71).

George A. Cameron has assigned as his field 'Ancient Persia'. Sections III ('Father' Cyrus and History Rewritten) and IV ('Huxter' Darius and History Remade) emphasise the efficiency of 'a magnificent propaganda machine' (p.82), and elucidate, rather puckishly, the astute publicity techniques of Darius. We are given a new raison d'être for the Besitun inscription, and it is pleasing to move again in the environs of the 'splendid city of Persepolis'.
The conception of history in ‘Ancient Israel’ is examined by Millar Burrows. He moves with freedom in a field in which he is an acknowledged master, discoursing genially, persuasively and positively if not always convincingly within the ambit of J E D P critical orthodoxy. Major themes are ‘The First Historians and Prophets’ (III); ‘The Deuteronomic Historians’ (IV); ‘Postexilic Prophets and Historians’ (V); ‘The Apocalyptic Interpretation of History’ (VI).

Especially fine is the introduction to the Summary (VII). This points out that the ‘basic distinctive presupposition of all ancient Hebrew ideas about history’ is that the historical process is motivated by a sovereign divine purpose which has as its aim firstly the good of the elect people and then through them of mankind as a whole. It follows as a no less rigid corollary that the notion of history as essentially cyclic and recurrent in character is ruled out, as is the concept of ‘undeviating, automatic, and irresistible progress in civilization’. History is declared to be on the Hebraic thesis ‘the work of a personal divine will, contending with the foolish, stubborn wills of men, promising and warning, judging and punishing and destroying, yet sifting, saving, and abundantly blessing those found amenable to discipline and instruction’ (p.128).

‘The Hellenistic Orient’, the contribution of C. Bradford Welles, is of immediate interest to readers of Prudentia. This able study closes with some enlightening observations on ‘The Roman Blight’ as seen in the history of the ‘little Macedonian colony of Dura-Europos, lying on the Euphrates just north of the present boundary between Iraq and Syria’, and on ‘The New Mentality’ (VIII) with its phenomena of escapism (pp.161-165).

‘Earliest Christianity’ by Erich Dinkler is discussed on lines that fail to evoke enthusiasm on the part of the present reviewer, though individual observations are striking and thought provoking. The excellent note on typological interpretation as distinguished from allegory (pp.187-188) merits specific mention. The interrelation of classical and theological study is admirably illustrated by this excerpt from p.190: ‘Greek and Roman antiquity looked on man as a part and organic member of the cosmos and each individual had the capacity to develop himself into a work of art (italics ours). But for Paul man is never able to arrive by his own power and is never thought of as part of the cosmos’. This is simply the N.T. and Augustinian contention that man is unable to transfigure himself out
of his own resources — a most unpopular dictum in large areas of contemporary society. Dinkler's lecture is studded with assertions that would guarantee lively passages at arms in an Honours or post-graduate seminar. Do all, for instance, agree that 'one cannot derive a philosophy of history from the New Testament'? (p.210).

'Patristic Christianity' is expounded by Roland H. Bainton who believes that 'the idea of history must encompass the origin and destiny of man' (p.217). It is of value to have outlined so succinctly the lines of thought in re as elaborated by Origen, Hippolytus, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa and others of less imposing stature. And then there is the towering and antagonistic figure of Marcion. The Christian position vis à vis Gnosticism is well explained. We quote (p.223): 'The Gnostic was bound to regard time on earth as a calamity because life in time is spent in the flesh, which is an impediment and an imprisonment. Marcion spoke brutally of the ignominy of existence, engendered in obscenity and brought forth in impurity... No Christian ever talked that way' (italics supplied).

'Early Islam' as a source for the idea of history occupies pp.237 to 310 in the symposium. Its author is Julius Obermann. This helpful study falls outside the scope of the present journal.

'The Twentieth-Century West and the Ancient Near East' by Paul Schubert concludes the series. This essay considers the Ancient Near Eastern Idea of History explicitly from the standpoint of our twentieth century idea of what constitutes history. It is, so to speak, a 'review of reviews'. The writer creditably acquits himself in a task of great intricacy. The argument is frequently subtle and concentration is a sine qua non for even moderate comprehension. After careful perusal, might one observe that the twentieth century view of history appears to be not entirely free from opacity? A syncretistic age had inevitable repercussions.

This publication is worth possessing. It admirably illustrates the strength of the comprehensive or overall approach and the advantages of delimitation and 'depth' study. As a pioneer effort in synthesis it proves itself worthy in conception as satisfactory in execution. It will probably yield most on positive lines to the student who, bringing with him a measure of maturity and a sound, if limited, academic equipment, cultivates a healthy scepticism on controversial issues.

H.R. Minn

51