

Reviews

THE OLDER TESTAMENT. THE SURVIVAL OF THEMES FROM THE ANCIENT ROYAL CULT IN SECTARIAN JUDAISM AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY by Margaret Barker, *SPCK*. 1987. 314pp. £40.

Margaret Barker's brilliant title sums up the message of her provocative book. We often say that Christianity took as its reference-point 'the Old Testament'; but then we have to resort to hypotheses about Hellenistic redeemer-myths, the non-Jewish origin of apocalyptic imagery, or Iranian dualism to explain the many features that cannot derive from the Old Testament as it now stands. For Margaret Barker a much simpler hypothesis is that early Christianity shared with many branches of sectarian Judaism an inheritance which is older than the present form of the Old Testament. Long before the Deuteronomic movement went to work on the biblical text, expurgating it in the interests of what would become orthodox Torah-Judaism, the Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of a developed mythological system which already contained in essence all the features that re-emerge in such books as 1 Enoch. This system was polytheistic: Yahweh was simply the god who, in the divine council, represented the interests of Israel. The king was a semi-divine figure; angels abounded; the sanctuary was mystically one with the garden of Eden, the mountain-top garden from which the star-god was expelled when sin first disturbed primal harmony (cf. Isaiah 14). The theological assumptions underlying this mythology have little in common with the prophetic-deuteronomic orthodoxy of individual accountability for sin or of the law as demands laid on the covenant-community; the battle between good and evil is on a cosmic scale, and the prosperity or adversity of the nation or the individual depend on success or failure in finding a place in the great cosmic drama, through 'wisdom', not on practising the piety of the Torah. Thus 'the apocalyptic elements of the Old Testament are not insertions, but fossils' (p. 282). The question for the modern scholar is not how something as alien as apocalyptic was able to infiltrate the Judaism represented by the canonical Old Testament, but rather how and why the founders of later Jewish orthodoxy rewrote their religious texts to eliminate the old mythology. And Christianity no longer looks like the Hellenizing of Palestinian Judaism through contact with foreign myths, but the survival of the 'old religion', which has suddenly found itself vindicated because the myths have found their confirmation in Jesus.

The scope of this book is vast; and such a brief summary altogether fails to do it justice. This is nothing less than a total theory of the history of

Israelite religion and of the formation of the Old Testament, and once one has assimilated it almost nothing will look the same again. Inevitably the treatment moves, at times uneasily, between very detailed proposals about individual texts and very broad-brush hypotheses about the interpretation of whole books. The reader who is not yet convinced of the main thesis is likely to be uncomfortable with the conspiracy-theory which it requires. The existence of the old mythology, Barker argues, has been unsuspected until now because deuteronomic and proto-rabbinic scribes have changed the texts to conceal it, with the result that it is mainly to be found in the places where the Hebrew text is most corrupt. Yet no-one doubts that there was a more luxuriant mythology in pre-exilic Israel than the Old Testament now contains, and Old Testament scholars frequently use the word 'demythologization' for the editorial activity that has quietly suppressed it. More difficult to prove, perhaps, is the association of the mythology with the Jerusalem Temple cult. Here Barker stands in the tradition of the 'Myth and Ritual' school which in its day represented a distinctive British contribution to Old Testament studies, and one which may well be due for a revival. But even if this connection cannot be demonstrated, enough remains to make us think very seriously before treating the weird thought-world of apocalyptic, with its heavenly journeys, magic, and cosmic battles, as an alien intrusion into Old Testament religion. Barker more than once hints that she believes the people who held to the old mythology were in touch with a reality to which both ancient and modern rationalism have become deaf and blind. Sympathy with such mythological beliefs may become an obsession, leading one to find them everywhere even against the evidence, and no doubt many will think that this has produced a book with more than its fair share of special pleading. But one person's special pleading is another's collection of straws in the wind. It is hardly conceivable that every individual argument here is correct: but the overall pattern that emerges is powerfully illuminating.

JOHN BARTON

THE RELIGION OF THE INCARNATION: ANGLICAN ESSAYS IN COMMEMORATION OF *LUX MUNDI* edited by Robert Morgan. *Bristol Classical Press, Bristol 1989. Pp. xx + 217. £19.95 cased, £7.95 paperback.*

Lux Mundi, which appeared in 1889, is a set of essays by Oxford theologians intended 'to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems'. At the time High Church theologians were upset by Charles Gore's adoption of what had recently come to be called 'higher criticism' in biblical studies. As the years went by, however, the book became something of a landmark in Anglican theology. It represented a 'liberal Catholicism' which eschewed doctrinal reductionism as well as Anglo-Papalist high camp. It is a pleasure to report that, whatever the internal difficulties of the Church of England which the media delight in sensationalizing, Anglican theologians associated with Oxford are still capable of mounting an intellectually interesting and essentially orthodox restatement of the Christian faith.

Robert Morgan, examining Scott Holland's essay in *Lux Mundi*, 302